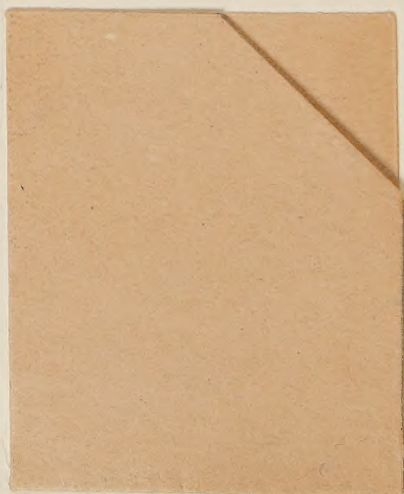




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TORONTO

# DENE HOLLOW

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD

AUTHOR OF

"EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "JOHNNY LUDLOW," ETC.

*ONE HUNDRED AND NINETEENTH THOUSAND*

THE ONLY AUTHORIZED AND COMPLETE EDITION

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# DENE HOLLOW

## PART THE FIRST



### CHAPTER I.

#### SIR DENE.

IT was a fair scene ; none fairer throughout this fairest of the Midland counties. Winter had turned. The blue of the sky was unbroken ; the sun shed down its bright and cheering warmth upon all ; it was the first day of spring.

Standing on somewhat elevated ground, a group of gentlemen were talking earnestly, and criticizing the points of the surrounding landscape. They stood with their backs to the iron gates of the lodge ; gates admitting to a winding avenue that led up to a fine old seat, Beechhurst Dene. Before them were sunny plains, and groves of ancient trees and sparkling rivulets ; a farmhouse here and there adding life to the picture. The little village of Hurst Leet—supposed to be a corruption of Hurst Hamlet—lay somewhat to the right as they gazed. Beyond it, two or three miles distant, was the city of Worcester, its cathedral conspicuous, this clear day, as well as the tapering spire of St. Andrew's church. Amidst other features, the eye, sweeping the distant horizon, caught the long chain of the Malvern Hills ; the white houses (few and far between in those days) nestling at their base. The hills looked not much further

off than Worcester itself, yet were more than double the distance, and in an opposite direction.

A quick walker taking the fields and the stiles, direct as the crow flies, might walk to the village of Hurst Leet in ten minutes from the lodge-gates of Beechhurst Dene. But if he chose the road—as he must do if he had either horse or vehicle—it would take him very much longer, for it was a roundabout way, and part of it was very hilly. He would turn to his left, almost as though going from the village instead of to it, and describe quite three parts of a circle : in short, make very much of what Tony Lumpkin calls a circumbendibus. The question now occupying these gentlemen was whether a more direct road should not be cut, chiefly for the accommodation of the family at the Dene.

The chief of the group was the Dene's owner—Sir Dene Clanwaring. By the family—and consequently by others—it was invariably pronounced Clannerling : indeed, some of the more remote branches had long spelt it so. Sir Dene was a tall, fine man of fifty years, his features noble and commanding, his complexion fresh and healthy. He was of fairly good birth, and had won his baronetcy after making his fortune in India. Fortunes were made in those bygone days, when the East India Company was flourishing, more quickly than in these. It was nothing for the soldier, resident there for long years, to unite with his duties the civilian's pursuits, so far as money-making went ; and Dene Clanwaring had done this. He was a brave man, had won fame as well as wealth, and at a comparatively early age returned home with his fortune and title. People told fabulous tales of his riches—as is sure to be the case—in increasing it to a few millions. He himself could have testified that it was about six thousand a year, all told.

Looking out, on his return from India, for some place to settle down in for life, chance directed Sir Dene Clanwaring to Beechhurst Dene in Worcestershire ; of which county he was a native. Whether the estate itself attracted him, or the accidental fact that it bore his own name, Dene, certain it was that Sir Dene searched no farther. He purchased it at once, entailing it on his eldest son, John Ingram Clanwaring, and his heirs for ever.

Shortly after entering into possession of it, his wife died.



Sir Dene—standing in the road before us to-day—is in deep mourning. It is worn for her. He was very fond of her, and the loss was keenly felt. Close by his side is his second son Geoffry; a tall, fair, pleasant-looking young fellow, in mourning also. Near to them bends an old and curious-looking little man, thin and undersized; his hard features pinched, his few grey hairs scanty. It is Squire Arde of the Hall. He wears a suit of pepper-and-salt; breeches, waistcoat, gaiters and coat; with silver knee- and shoe-buckles, and a white beaver hat. Over his clothes is a drab great-coat of some fluffy material, but the Squire has thrown it back, and it seems to rest on his narrow shoulders. The only other individual, completing the party, is Jonathan Drew, Sir Dene's bailiff; a hard man also, but a faithful, trustworthy servant. Sir Dene took him over from the previous owner of the estate, Mr. Honeythorn, and has already found his value. Drew manages the land and tenants well, though complaints are heard of his severity. He is turned sixty; a maypole of a man, in a long, fustian coat, and high-crowned brown hat, looking altogether not unlike a scarecrow in a corn-field. The bailiff is exceedingly ugly, and appears at the present moment more so than usual from an access of temper, plainly perceptible as he addresses his master.

“‘Make my duty to Sir Dene, Mr. Drew, and tell him that I can't be turned out of my house nohow; I have the paper,’ says she. ‘Then why don't you produce the paper, Mrs. Barber?’ says I. ‘Because I can't find it, sir; I've mislaid it,’ says she. ‘Mislaid what you never had,’ says I, as I left her. And she never did have it, Sir Dene,” wound up Drew; “I don't believe it for a moment. She's an obstinate old woman!”

“When she sees there are other cottages to be had; when she knows that it will be to the advantage of all her neighbours. I must say that I think it unreasonable of her to refuse to leave,” remarked Sir Dene, his brow contracted, his face just then severe. Accustomed all his life to command, he brooked no opposition to his will.

“Onreasonable, Sir Dene!” echoed Drew. “It's a sight worse than onreasonable: it's vicious.”

The new road Sir Dene purposed making to the village, had been the subject of much planning and consideration

between himself and his agent. One or two sites had been thought of, but the best—there could be no doubt about it—the most convenient and the shortest was one that would open almost immediately opposite his own gates. The line that would have to be cut through was his own property; and a footway, for a part of the road, seemed to indicate its suitability. If they cut this line, it would be at quite a third less cost, both as to money and trouble, than any other. Naturally, Sir Dene wished to decide upon it; and Drew, eager for the new scheme, knowing it must improve the property, would not tolerate any criticism against it.

But there was an obstacle to the scheme. About a hundred yards down the path just mentioned stood a very pretty cottage: a dwelling of five rooms, with yellow jasmine climbing up its outer walls. It had once belonged to a farmer named Barber, who came into it in right of his wife. He had died in earlier life; several years ago now; leaving his widow and two daughters. His affairs were found to be in disorder; that is, he had died hopelessly in debt. The widow and daughters took immediate steps to extricate themselves and uphold their late relative's integrity. The cottage, with the little land attaching to it, was sold to Mr. Honeythorn, then owner of Beechhurst Dene, who had long wished to possess it. Widow Barber remained in the occupancy of the dwelling and one field as tenant, paying a small yearly rent; and she said that Mr. Honeythorn had given her a covenant, promising that she should not be turned out whilst she lived.

To make the road in the track contemplated by Sir Dene, this cottage would have to come down, for the projected line ran right through it. Drew, acting for Sir Dene, served Mrs. Barber with a formal notice to quit. Mrs. Barber met it by a verbal refusal, civilly and tearfully delivered, to go out; and an assertion to the above effect: namely, that she held the right to remain in her cottage for the term of her natural life, and possessed a document in Mr. Honeythorn's own writing confirming this right. In fact, this document alone constituted her right, for nothing in relation to it had been found amidst Mr. Honeythorn's effects, though his executors had searched minutely. Jonathan Drew told Mrs. Barber to her face that

there had never been such a document, except in her imagination; Mrs. Barber had retaliated, not only that there was one, but that Drew knew of it as well as she did, for he had known of it at the time it was given. However, Mrs. Barber, search as she would, could not find this document; she had either lost or mislaid it, or had never possessed it. Matters, therefore, stood at this point, and Mrs. Barber retained the notice to quit at Lady-Day: which was fast approaching.

The affair had vexed Sir Dene, and was at length beginning to enrage him. Fully persuaded—partly by Drew, partly by the fact of absolute want of evidence—that no such right had ever been conceded to the widow, he could not see why the old woman's obstinacy should be allowed to stand in the way of his plans. One dwelling-house was surely as good as another. But he had not quite fully decided on this thing; and he was standing out there now, talking it over with his son and Drew, with a view to arriving at some decision. Squire Arde had come up accidentally.

"It would be only the work of a month or two," cried Sir Dene in his enthusiasm, standing with his arms on the fence, and looking across to the village. "See, Arde, it seems but a stone's-throw."

"And nothing in the way of it but that cottage!" put in Jonathan Drew.

Geoffry Clanwaring was sending his good-natured blue eyes roving here and there about the landscape, apparently in thought. Presently he addressed his father.

"Would it not be possible, sir, to carry the cutting a few yards on this side," moving his right hand, "and so leave the cottage standing?"

"No," replied Sir Dene. "The road shall be cut straight, or not at all."

"If you made an in-and-out road, like a dog's hind leg, as good stick to the old one, Mr. Geoffry," spoke up Drew. "Besides, there'd be the stream in the way lower down. No: there's no line but this—and Sir Dene'll hardly let an obstinate old widow stand in the light of it."

"There's the smoke a-pouring out of her chimney," struck in Squire Arde—who in familiar life was not very particular in

his mode of speech, after the fashion of many country gentlemen of the period.

"Boiling the pot for dinner!" cried Drew. "Cross-grained old cat!"

"I mind me something was said about that deed or paper at the time," resumed the Squire.

"What paper?" asked Sir Dene, sharply.

"The one given her by Honeythorn."

Sir Dene drew a long breath. He would never have committed an injustice in the face of facts.

"*Was* such an agreement given to her?"

"I don't know myself," replied Squire Arde, gazing at the smoke with his watery eyes. "Some talk on't was abroad. 'Twas said Tom Barber's widow had got such an agreement out of Honeythorn. On t'other hand, it might have been all lies. Drew, here, ought to know which way it was."

"I've told Sir Dene there was none," spoke Drew. "Mr. Honeythorn did nothing o' that kind without consulting me. And if he had—put it that way—ought it to be binding on Sir Dene? Why, of course not. Old Granny Barber's one of them cantankerous idiots that think nobody's turn is to be served but their own."

"Well, I must be going—or I shall not get there and home again by two o'clock, and that's my dinner hour," observed the Squire, drawing his light coat over his contracted chest. "I have a goose to pluck with Black, up at the Trailing Indian. He was seen in my woods a night or two ago; and he'll have to tell me the reason why."

Drew craned his long neck derisively. "If you can keep Randy Black out o' your woods, Squire, you'll be cleverer than other people."

"Well, I'm going up to have a try at it," was the old man's answer. "Good-day to you, Sir Dene."

"A moment yet, Squire Arde," said Sir Dene, detaining him. "Tell me truly what your opinion on this subject is. Should I turn the old woman out, or not?"

But the curious little man seemed to shrink into himself at the question; to become smaller than ever, if that were possible; as he avoided Sir Dene with a shake of the head.



"No, no, Sir Dene—no good asking *me*. I've lived long enough to know that to thrust one's fingers into one's neighbour's pie brings nothing but heart-burning in the long-run. If I said 'turn her out,' and you repented of it later, you'd lay the blame on me. 'Arde advised me,' you'd mutter to yourself night and morning, and give me anything but a blessing. Take the other view. If I said '*don't* turn her out ; make the road elsewhere,' and you took the advice, you'd be ever hankering after the track you'd missed. No, no. You must act upon your own judgment, Sir Dene ; not mine. It's nothing to me. 'The old roads have served my time, and will do so to the end. Good-day.'"

He moved away with brisk steps towards the left, stooping forward, as was his wont. Another minute, and there met him three individuals : a gentleman and two young ladies. Or, if not a gentleman he looked one. It was Robert Owen, a farmer who had only recently come to live in the neighbourhood, renting a farm from Sir Dene. He was of striking appearance. Sir Dene was a handsome man, but not so handsome as Robert Owen. Of unusual height, slender and upright, his face, with its clearly-cut features of the highest type, its pure complexion, bright even yet as a woman's, and its very dark blue eyes, presented a picture beautiful to look upon. But what caused him to be more remarkable than anything else was the fact that he had a soft, silvery white beard, falling over his white top-coat : and in those days beards were very uncommon. In years he might have numbered about as many as Sir Dene. His two daughters had inherited his beauty, but not his height. Lovely girls were they, with dimpled, blushing cheeks, modest, simple, and retiring in manner ; generally called, both in this neighbourhood and the one they had left, "the pretty Miss Owens." Mary, the elder, had been a wife for some months now ; George Arde, a relative of the Squire, having married her. Maria, the younger, was Miss Owen still.

"How d'ye do, Owen ?" cried the Squire, carelessly.

Robert Owen raised his hat as he returned the greeting. None could be more sensible than he of the social distance between himself and Squire Arde ; he was nothing but a work-

ing farmer. The young ladies stood blushing. They wore hooded scarlet cloaks, according to the fashion of the time, and white straw gipsy hats, their beautiful brown hair falling in curls.

"It's you, is it?" cried the Squire, nodding to Mary. "How's George?"

"He is quite well, sir, thank you," she replied, with a slight curtsy.

"Over here?"

"No, sir. He is at home. My father came into Worcester yesterday and brought me back with him: my mother's not well. George is coming over for me to-morrow."

With a general nod from the Squire, to which the young ladies curtsied and the farmer again raised his hat, they pursued their respective ways. The footsteps caused Sir Dene and his party to turn their heads, which were still bent over the fence. Jonathan Drew vouchsafed an ungracious nod to the farmer; Sir Dene a more pleasant one; but Geoffry Clanwaring went up, spoke cordially to the farmer in his free, good-natured way, and shook hands with Mrs. Arde and Maria Owen.

It was only a slight episode. They went on, and Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring returned to the fence again.

But Sir Dene had become tired of standing still; perhaps a little tired of his indecision. Saying something about business at Hurst Leet, he suddenly turned alone down the narrow path before mentioned—which would take him straight by the cottage in dispute.

Perhaps few cottages could boast of less prospect in front. This had none whatever. The door was close to the path; there was not more than a yard and a half of ground between them, but that little space was redolent of sweet-scented gillyflowers—as they are called in Worcestershire. On the other side of the path, the bank rose perpendicularly; a high bank, with elm trees towering above it, throwing their shadow over the cottage roof. This fine grove of trees—which began at the end of the path, opposite Sir Dene's gates—was the pride of Sir Dene's heart. He would not have had one of the trees cut down for the world. The cottage—as Sir Dene

walked—lay to the right, the bank and trees on the left. The door was standing open as he passed, and he caught a vision of a plump old woman within it in grey stockings, stooping to skim a pan of cream in the passage.

“Old dame Barber,” said Sir Dene to himself.

Old dame Barber, hearing footsteps, looked up. When she saw whose they were, an ice-shaft seemed to dart through her heart, and she ran into her kitchen like a frightened hare. She wore a short black gown of rough flannel cloth, its sleeves cut short at the elbow, a cotton handkerchief crossed upon her shoulders, and confined under her check apron, and a mob-cap, tied round with black ribbon, the bow in front. What little hair could be seen was grey. A cleanly-looking, timorous old woman, five or six years past seventy. To be turned out of the cottage in which she was born, and had lived all her life, seemed to her the very worst evil that could possibly befall her in this world. The old cling to their resting-places; and it is in the nature of age to exaggerate troubles.

The kitchen-window at the back looked out upon a fair scene, as pleasant as the front was the opposite: a vision of sunny plains sleeping in the sunshine, Worcester stretching away in the distance. Also—morning after morning, as that old woman awoke, her eyes had fallen on the familiar Malvern Hills (of which she could catch a glimpse from her own front chamber), and on the sloping vale of wood and dale descending in one great expanse.

“Lord, be good to me,” she murmured, her hands crossed upon her bosom, that was beating fast under the cotton handkerchief. “Let not my poor homestead be reft from me while I live!”

Her glance fell on her cherished out-door belongings; on the one pig in its sty; the cow in the meadow, by whose produce she was helped to exist; the cabbage patch and potato ground. The brook, winding along almost close to her back-door, was dancing in the sunlight, its gentle murmurings falling on the ear. Time had been when that murmuring soothed her; latterly it seemed to suggest nothing but woe. Suddenly, another sound drowned it—a sharp knock, as with a stick, at the front-door. Looking out of her kitchen, she saw Sir Dene.

Whether she stood on her head or her heels, the poor woman could not have told, had she lived to be a hundred. The sight scared her senses away. At the most favourable moments, when she was a younger woman, she would have been struck with incapacity at the presence of so great a man as Sir Dene Clanwaring: regarding him now as a powerful enemy, the feeling increased tenfold. Saying he had stepped back to speak to her, he walked, of his own accord, into the open small front-room, or parlour, with its sanded floor, a painted tea-tray lodged against the wall by way of ornament. She followed him in, curtseying and trembling visibly. Without circumlocution, Sir Dene inquired whether she could produce the document she professed to possess.

What with the abrupt question and its nature, her own fears and innate timidity, Mrs. Barber behaved like a lunatic, and could get out no answer at all. When it did come, it was strangely hesitating, and given almost in a whisper.

She "believed" she had such a paper somewhere—and hoped "his honour" would not be hard upon her.

Sir Dene Clanwaring curled his lip. A man of honour himself, he regarded deception as the worst fault on earth. This old woman before him, trembling from head to foot, words and manner uncertain, was evidently telling a falsehood. From that moment he regarded the plea she had put forth as nothing but a pure invention.

"Listen, Mrs. Barber," he said sternly. "The road I purpose making will be of great benefit to myself and the public: it ought not to be stopped by any private interests. If you have the agreement you speak of, bring it to me, and I will consider it -though I do not promise, and do not at present intend, to be swayed by it. This is Tuesday: if, on Friday, I have not the paper before me, I shall give orders for the work to proceed. Lady-Day will fall about a week afterwards; and I must request that you will be out of this on or before that day when it shall come. Good-morning, ma'am."

She closed the door after him with trembling hands, when he had reached the proper distance, and then sat down on the nearest seat -which happened to be a milk-pail turned upside down—and wiped her face with her apron.



Sir Dene went on down the path. Very soon it widened considerably, and branched off into the open fields. Had the cottage stood as low down as this, there would have been no absolute necessity to raze it. Bearing to the right, after stepping over the little bridge, and passing his bailiff's house, nearly hidden amidst trees, Sir Dene crossed a stile at the end of the field, and the village was before him, the church lying rather far beyond it. As he went past the village stocks—often used in those days—the village doctor, James Priar—a little man in spectacles, looking ten years older than his age, which was only thirty—crossed his path.

“Have you decided about the new road, Sir Dene?” the doctor asked, when they had talked for a minute or two.

“Yes; in a week's time from this you will see it begun,” was Sir Dene's firm answer, as he pursued his way.

We must follow Drew for a moment, before closing the chapter. Not for any special purpose regarding himself, but to afford the reader a little more insight into the locality.

Mr. Jonathan Drew, when his master quitted him, and Geoffry Clanwaring had disappeared within his father's gates, betook himself about his business. Pursuing the road to the right—in the opposite direction to that taken by Squire Arde—he soon came to some farmhouses and cottages. Some half-mile, or more, from the gates of Beechhurst Dene, there stood back, on the left, a substantial stone house, fronting Hurst Leet, surrounded by gardens and farm buildings. This was Arde Hall. The road here was open, and the village below the Hall could be more plainly seen. Undoubtedly this would have been the best spot for the new road, if one were made at all: but Squire Arde, to whom the ground belonged, would as soon have thought of turning it into a ploughed field. Jonathan Drew came to a standstill, as though tracing it out, for his thoughts were running upon the road.

“Ay, this would ha' been the right track,” ran his reflections. “But catch old Arde at it! When Sir Dene does it, though, Arde won't be backward to reap the benefit. A good move it'll be for Sir Dene's property. The Squire gets more niggardly as he grows older. Wonder who'll come in

for his savings and estate? A fine estate it be, surely. Shouldn't wonder but he leaves it all to a lunatic asylum! As to cross-grained Granny Barber, who's she, that she should put in her spoke against the public good? One place is just as good as another, for the short time she has to live: one foot in the grave now, and t'other hardly out of it."

With this, Mr. Drew brought his comments to a conclusion. There was a pathway down to the village from here, just as there was nearer Beechhurst Dene; but he appeared undecided whether or not to take it, and finally continued his way along the road. We need not follow him. The highway took a sharp turn just above here, and branched off, between rich pasture lands and homesteads large and small, far away from Hurst Leet.

## CHAPTER II.

### HAREBELL FARM.

TURNING to the left, on emerging from the gates of Beechhurst Dene, the road continued in a tolerably straight line for about the third of a mile. It then branched off, almost at right angles, in two directions: that to the right being a continuation of the road; that to the left soon becoming nothing but a solitary lane. We may have occasion to follow the road later on, so just now will take the lane.

As dismal and shadowy a place at night, this Harebell Lane, as you would care to enter. On the right, lying back, stood a very moderately sized dwelling, with its fold-yard, hayricks, and barns. This was Harebell Farm, in the occupancy of Robert Owen. Not far off, on the left, were two wooden gates side by side; one for carts, one for pedestrians—these were the side entrances to Beechhurst Dene. The lane wound on, growing narrower and darker. Its banks were tolerably high, overhanging trees obscuring the daylight. But it soon widened considerably, and in one part curving to the right, there lay a rather deep pool, green with slime and overgrown with rushes, known as "Harebell Pond." A

plantation of firs was fenced in on the bank rising immediately above it. Altogether, in spite of its wider space, this was the most dreary part of the lane. A few yards onwards, the lane, narrowing again, took a sharp turn to the right, and led directly to an inn of doubtful reputation, called the Trailing Indian. The man keeping this inn was named Randolph Black. His brother, Moses Black, had died about a twelvemonth ago at Harebell Farm. They had come as strangers to the place some years ago, apparently men of some means, and became tenants of Mr. Honeythorn. Moses took Harebell Farm; Randolph the solitary public-house, then known as the Plough, but which he re-named the Trailing Indian. After a few years Moses Black died. Randolph immediately applied to Sir Dene Clanwaring—who had just become his landlord through the purchase of Beechhurst Dene—to be allowed to take the farm as well as the inn; betraying unmistakable eagerness for possession. His character, however, had developed itself by this time, and Sir Dene, instructed on the point, refused his application. Robert Owen then presented himself to Sir Dene as a tenant for the farm, and to him it was leased. A little beyond the Trailing Indian, Harebell Lane was crossed by a high-road, in fact was terminated by it; and it was to the chance of travellers on the highway turning aside to the inn, that the Trailing Indian trusted—or assumed to trust—for its support.

But we must go back to Harebell Farm. Entering the small wooden gate and passing round by the barns, ricks, and fold-yard, we come to the front of the dwelling. The house was full of angles; the red brick of which it was built had become dark with age. A square patch of lawn and flower-garden lay before the door; beyond it stretched the expanse of meadow and corn-fields; with the summits of the Malvern Hills bounding the distant horizon.

It was a day or two after the one mentioned in the last chapter; and the sky was as blue, and the sunshine as bright as then. In a homely room, partaking somewhat of the kitchen as well as of the parlour, except that cooking was never seen there, sat Mrs. Owen after dinner; a delicate-looking woman of low voice and gentle manners, clad in a warm

gown of purple stuff, a large collar of muslin-work and a white lace cap. Her feet rested on a footstool; her thin hands were busy with a pile of stockings, sorting those that wanted darning from those that did not. At the window, preparing to embroider a strip of fine cambric that was to form a portion of an infant's cap, sat Maria Owen—prettier without her bonnet even than with it. She wore a dress of light, checked green silk, its sleeves finished with a ruffle and some falling lace just below the elbow. Her hair fell in curls; her fresh, bright, dimpled face was charming to look upon. The floor was of red brick, but a carpet covered the greater part of it; the furniture, plain, old, but of substantial mahogany, was faultlessly polished. This was the parlour for ordinary use; there was a handsomer one, called the best parlour, for high days and holidays. The terms dining-room and drawing-room were too advanced for a farmhouse in those unpretending days.

Maria looked up, an eager expression on her beautiful face. "Mamma, how long do you think I shall be working this cap?"

"That depends, my dear, upon the time you give to it," was Mrs. Owen's answer. "You cannot neglect your home occupations for fancy work."

"Oh, I know that, and shall not neglect anything. I should like to get it done in two months."

"You have chosen a very intricate pattern, Maria."

"But it will be all the more beautiful. I should not like Mary to buy a best cap. Rather than that, I would tell her I am working this one: though I want it to be a surprise. I think you can give me some old lace for it."

"When the cap's finished, I shall see whether it is worth it."

Standing near the fire, having come in during this colloquy, was a rather tall, somewhat hard-featured woman, a strange look of perplexity on her sensible face. She wore the costume of the day, a print gown straight to the ankles, white stockings, and tied shoes. This was Mary Barber: the faithful upper servant of the house—indeed, they kept only one other maid—but regarded more as a friend than a servant. Her features were well formed; her hair, worn in small curls on either side

her face beneath the cap-border, was still bright brown. What her age was, could not be guessed from her appearance. At thirty years of age she had looked middle-aged; she looked it still; she would probably look it for thirty years to come. Perhaps she was now not very much past forty. Her mother was the old woman you saw skimming the milk.

"Have you done the ironing, Mary?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"No, ma'am."

A shade of surprise passed over Mrs. Owen's features, but she said nothing.

"I can't settle to anything, ma'am; and that's the plain truth," cried the woman, raising her hands. "It is a cruel, wicked thing, that my poor old mother should come to this when she's close upon the grave."

"It is grievous to be turned out of one's home," remarked Mrs. Owen, a sad, far-off look in her eyes.

"It's worse to have her word disputed: at least, I think it so. Jonathan Drew told me to my face last night, ma'am, that mother must be in her dotage to fancy she had ever had the deed."

"But you told me Drew himself knew of her having it."

"Mother says he knew of it; she always said he did. I wish Sir Dene Clanwaring had stayed where he was, before ever coming here to trouble us."

"When once your mother's out of the place—if she has to leave it—I dare say she won't mind it, Mary," observed the younger lady. "One home is as good as another."

"Much you know about it, Miss Maria! If you had to be turned out of your home, you'd tell a different tale."

"Why, I have been turned out of it. We all have. That is, my father chose to leave. I can tell you, Mary, I was sad enough at the time though I like this one best now."

Mary Barber gave a significant sniff, as if she thought there might be some special reason for the young lady's liking the new home better than the old.

"You don't understand it, Miss Maria. The young can't be expected to know how much old people grow attached to their homes, so that they seem just a part of themselves, and it is as hard to part with 'em as to part with a limb. I am sure

of this," concluded Mary Barber emphatically, "that if mother is driven out, she'll go straight to the graveyard."

Maria dropped her cambric in consternation. "Do you mean that it would—kill her?" she asked in low tones.

"As certainly, Miss Maria, as that the Lord's looking down to note the injustice. And He *will* note it—if it's done: ay, and avenge it in His own good time."

"Hush, Mary," interposed her mistress. "Let us hope for the best. She may be allowed to remain in it yet."

"Well, I'll hope it, ma'am, as long as I can, and will do my best to further it. But it will be none the nearer coming to pass, for all that: I've not had these bad dreams lately for nothing. And poor mother, always in distress, is first and foremost in every one of 'em."

There was a short silence: the cuckoo clock against the wall ticking out lazily the moments of the afternoon. Mary Barber resumed.

"If it wasn't for that bit of ironing, ma'am—and I know it ought to be done when to-morrow's Friday and cleaning-day—I'd ask you to spare me."

"What for?" questioned Mrs. Owen.

"To go to Sir Dene Clanwaring," said the woman in decisive tones, and both her auditors looked up in amazement. "When I was at mother's last night I told her to have one last hunt for the document, and to send it me this morning if she could find it. It hasn't come; a pretty safe sign that it's not found. But perhaps if we both go together to Sir Dene, she and me, and I speak up quietly for her—for she'd never have the courage to speak for herself—he may listen to us, and let her stay on. The ironing can——"

"I'll do the ironing for you, Mary," cried Miss Owen, starting up with ready good-nature. "I'll go and do it at once."

Mary Barber prepared for her errand; and came down dressed in her best, surprising her mistress. A cinnamon gown of soft cashmere, and grey twilled-silk shawl, with a deep border of bright colours. She had had the shawl for half her lifetime, and it looked as good as new now. The straw bonnet, of the "cottage" shape, was trimmed with gay ribbons,

"You have dressed yourself in your best, Mary!"



"Yes, ma'am. If I had gone in my rags, Sir Dene mightn't have looked twice at me. You'll wish me luck, ma'am."

But the word was a mere figure of speech. Mary Barber was always singularly neat. And as she turned out at the back door, a folded handkerchief and her large cotton umbrella in her hand—an invariable appendage when she had on her best things, no matter how fine the weather—an old slipper and a joyous laugh came after her from Miss Maria.

She went off at a brisk pace, drawing on her gloves, and in the fold-yard met the farmer, who regarded the dressed-up apparition with intense astonishment.

"Why, where are you off to, Mary, woman?"

She told him. Mr. Owen shook his head a little, as if he had not much faith in the result of the expedition.

"You can try, of course, Mary. But great men like Sir Dene don't choose to be thwarted in any scheme they set their minds on."

"Sir Dene went so far as to say to mother that he'd deliberate upon it if the deed could be found, sir," she observed, noting the signs.

"But it's not found. My opinion is, it would have been better never to have said anything about the deed, as it's not forthcoming."

"Why!—surely, sir, you are not supposing there never was such a deed?" she exclaimed.

"I feel as sure as you do that the deed, or promise, or whatever it was, was given," he answered; "I heard of it at the time. But Sir Dene is a stranger amongst us; and to assert such a thing to him, and in the same breath plead inability to produce the document, gives a bad impression, you see."

Mr. Owen was in his usual working attire—for he took a very active part amongst his men: drab breeches, gaiters, and coat. In his younger days, Robert Owen was fond of pleasure; had been what would now be called fast, seduced to it perhaps by his remarkable beauty. He would neglect his business to follow the hounds, to take a morning's shooting, to kill time, and spend money in many other ways. Debts had accumulated,

and he had ever since been crippled in means. Instead of remaining a gentleman-farmer, he had been obliged to degenerate into a working one, always kept back by want of capital. None could regret that early improvidence more than he ; but unfortunately regrets cannot undo these things. He had taken this new farm, hoping to do better than he had done at the old one, the lease of which was out. Mrs. Owen had been quite willing to leave the old home. They had lost their youngest son, Thomas, in it, a very promising youth, under distressing circumstances, and as long as she remained there she could not forget her sorrow.

"Mary Barber will not succeed," was Mr. Owen's thought as he stroked his fine white beard in abstraction, and his eyes followed her through the gate to the lane. "The old woman has no doubt inadvertently destroyed that paper : and without it she has no case to bring forward."

"Well, mother, is it found?" began Mary Barber, entering her mother's kitchen without ceremony.

Mrs. Barber was bending over the fire, on which stood a large saucepan full of potato peelings that she was boiling for her fowls. She turned her head.

"Lawk a day !" was her exclamation as the smart vision met her astonished view. "Whatever be you dressed up for like that, Mary ? It isn't the wake."

"No ; but missis has given me a holiday," replied Mary, sitting down on the wooden chair, which she dusted first with a cloth. "Have you found the document, mother ?"

Poor Mrs. Barber shook her head. "I've looked for it till I can look no longer : above stairs and below. I looked till I went to bed, Mary, where I got no sleep all night ; and at daylight I was up, looking again. It'll wear me out, child ; it'll wear me out."

Lifting the saucepan on the hob while she ceased stirring, she dropped on to a low wooden stool, and hid her face in her hands. Mary Barber was looking more cross than compassionate.

"To leave the place where I've lived all my life ! To see my bits o' furniture turned out, sold perhaps—for where am I to put 'em?—these very pots and pans even"—ranging her

eyes on the hanging tins—"that I've kept as bright as silver ! My poor cow, my fowls, the pig in its sty—Mary, I'd rather the gentlefolk killed me outright."

"Now, look here, mother," said Mary—who never wasted the slightest time or sympathy upon sentiment. "That document is in the house, or ought to be ; and if it is, it must be found. First of all—where did you put it ?"

"Where did I put it ?" repeated Mrs. Barber, rather listlessly, for just at that moment her thoughts were running on abstract matters. "When I was looking in the press this morning—and *that'll* have to go with the other things, Mary ! Oh, woe's me !"

"Just carry your mind back, mother"—with a slight stamp of the umbrella—"to that past time when it was given you. Who brought it here ?"

"Who brought it here ?—why, Squire Honeythorn himself. He came in and sat down in this kitchen in that very chair of your poor father's. I remember being vexed because I hadn't got on my best black gown."

"About Mr. Honeythorn, mother," interrupted Mary Barber, bringing her sharply to the point.

"Well, he came in—I can see his pigtail now, hanging over the back o' the chair. The money for the house and land was paid over to Lawyer Haynes, he said, and he had brought himself the promise in his own hand that I should not be turned from the place while I lived. A great rogue that Haynes was ! He lined his own pocket smartly while he settled with your poor father's creditors."

"Mother, the afternoon's slipping on. Where did you put the paper then ?"

"In my best tea-caddy," said the old woman promptly. "All my papers of consequence be kept there ; and nobody has ever had the key but me. That same day, after I'd locked it up, Jonathan Drew looked in to say the money was paid—not knowing his master had been here before him. I told him of the promise I had got, and he said it was no news to him. Squire Honeythorn had told him he should give it."

"Have you seen the paper since then ?"

"Yes, many a time. I've looked at it when I've unlocked the caddy for other papers."

"Will you let *me* look, mother? Maybe it's there still."

Mrs. Barber was a little offended at this, asking her daughter if she thought she had lost her eyesight; but finally consented. The japanned tea-caddy had stood on the parlour mantelpiece, its centre ornament, as long as Mary could remember. Mary's keen grey eyes searched every paper it contained—chiefly consisting of half-yearly receipts for her rent—but the missing document was not there.

"You must have put it somewhere else yourself, mother."

"I suppose I must. There was a great talk one winter of the highwaymen being about, and I know I got worried over my caddy and hid the papers away in places. But I always thought I put 'em all back again later."

"Well, there seems nothing for it but to beg grace of Sir Dene Clanwaring, as we've no proof of our right. And that's where I am going, mother, and what I've made myself smart for. You must come with me."

But the astounding proposition put Mrs. Barber into so great a tremor—go to Sir Dene Clanwaring!—that Mary found it was of no use urging it. So she departed alone. In the narrow pathway, almost close to the cottage, stood Jonathan Drew and a couple of men; the latter with a measuring-chain in their hands. Mrs. Barber saw them from her door, and turned pale as death.

"What are you doing?" demanded Mary Barber, as she was passing them.

"Only measuring the ground a bit," said Jonathan Drew.

"For the new hollow they talk of?"

"There's nothing else we should be measuring it for," was his retort. And Mary Barber walked on.

Crossing the high road, she entered the gates, and proceeded up the avenue between the fine old trees. Beechhurst Dene was an ancient red-brick mansion, roomy, old-fashioned, comfortable, and handsome withal, both outside and in. It stood in the midst of its park, ornamental gardens immediately around it. Mary Barber had been there more than once in Mr. Honeythorn's time, and knew it well. Avoiding the

front entrance, she bore round to her right, to the familiar entrance used by the servants, tenants, and, in fact, often by the family themselves. Just on this side the prospect from the house seemed confined, so many trees and shrubs were crowded about it. A pathway led directly to the gate in Harebell Lane: and Mary Barber would have made that her way of entrance but for having to go to her mother's. A parlour, with a bay window opening to the ground, faced this way, and Mary saw Sir Dene sitting in it. Knocking at the open side door with her umbrella, she asked a footman if she could be allowed to see his master. The servant did not happen to know her, and told Sir Dene a lady was asking to see him: "leastways, a respectable-looking woman, that might be a farmer's wife."

Sir Dene admitted her. But when she introduced herself as Mary Barber, and he found she was the widow Barber's daughter, come to worry him about the new cutting, he felt anything but pleased. Something had occurred that afternoon to vex Sir Dene: it had nothing to do with the matter in question, but it served to put him out of temper. However, he was civil enough to ask her to sit down, and did not refuse to hear her. It was a small room, the floor covered with matting. Sir Dene chiefly received his tenants here, and other business people.

Mary Barber sat bolt upright on the extreme edge of the chair: her folded handkerchief and umbrella in her hand, her back to the window. Sir Dene was on the other side of the table, near the fire, his open desk before him. He listened to what she had to say, without once interrupting her.

"Do you think this deed ever had any existence?" he then asked—and his tone bore a ring of suppressed scorn, which caused Mary Barber's hard cheek to flush.

"I am sure it had, sir."

"Did you ever see it, Mrs. Barber?"

"No, sir, never," was the straightforward answer. "My mother did not show it to me. And I never heard that my sister saw it, either," she added, in her honesty. "Neither of us was at home then. Father's affairs took a good while to arrange after his death; and before they were settled, my sister

Hester and I had gone out to relieve mother of our keep and make our own way in the world. I went to service; Hester married."

"Does she—your sister—profess to remember anything of this promise?"

"She has been dead some years, sir."

"Don't you think it a strange thing that your mother should not have kept more carefully a paper of the importance she appears to attach to this?"

"My opinion is, sir, that she has kept it too carefully, and put it into some out-of-the-way place for safety, that she can't now remember," was Mary Barber's independent answer. "There's no doubt she was scared because of the highway-men; and the best of us are liable to forgetfulness, especially when we grow old."

"I cannot say more than I have done," cried Sir Dene, impatiently. "Produce the deed, and its merits shall be examined. I am in ignorance as to what weight it carried, or was intended to carry. Of course, if it conferred the right *legally* that you seem to fancy—which I think almost an impossibility—we must submit it to a lawyer, and take his opinion; but I strongly suspect it was not worth the paper it was written upon."

"Mr. Honeythorn would not trifle with my mother, sir."

"As to Mr. Honeythorn, I don't doubt that his bare word, passed, would have been sufficient for him to act upon to the end of his life, without need of document to confirm it. But what bound him could never be intended to bind me. No, ma'am, nor be expected to, in any sort of reason."

"Then I'm afraid you'll go on with this dreadful thing, sir," said Mary Barber, her grey eyes fixed upon Sir Dene.

"Dreadful thing! It will be a very good thing."

"Not for my mother. She has been a good woman, sir; her cup of sorrow brimful."

"I should say she must be an obstinate one, Mrs. Barber. She would be just as well in another cottage as in this—and there are plenty to be had for the seeking."

"She cannot live long, sir," pleaded Mary Barber.  
"And——"



"As to that, she may live as long as I," was the interruption. "She is a healthy, hearty old woman, and may last for ten, fifteen, ay, twenty years to come."

"She is in her seventy-sixth year, Sir Dene. Oh, sir, spare her! Don't turn her out to die. I'd make bold to ask, sir, how you would like to be turned out of a home where you'd lived all your days, when you shall be as old as she is. She was born in it; it was her father's before her; and she brought up her children in it, Hester and me. Sir, I know you are one of the gentlefolk of the land, and it's not becoming in me to dare to speak to you in this free way. Heaven knows, I'd only do it for poor mother's sake."

"I thought the property belonged to your father," observed Sir Dene, on whom the pleading appeared to make no impression.

"No, sir; to my mother; she was Hester Drew. When she married Thomas Barber she went home to her house, which was reversing the order of things. Father had nothing of his own, and he was somehow a bad manager; never fortunate. When he died, and it was found affairs were in a bad way, there seemed nothing for it but selling the property, so that folks should be paid, and my sister and I turned out at once. Squire Honeythorn was sorry for mother, and gave her the promise we tell of."

"Is your mother any relation to Drew, my bailiff?" asked Sir Dene, noting the coincidence of the names.

"His father and mother's father were second or third cousins, sir—nothing to speak of."

"Has your mother any income of her own?"

"Not a penny, sir. She sacrificed all she had to pay father's debts. The sale of her milk and poultry meets her rent, perhaps a bit over; and she has potatoes and other garden stuff; and her pig, which makes bacon to last her the year. And for the rest, I help her to a bit of tea and that, and Hester's family to other trifles. We shall never let her starve, sir, whatever betide."

"At her age she ought to be glad of the prospect of being relieved from the care of a cow and a pig," remarked Sir Dene.

"It is her great pleasure to be active, sir; the back is generally fitted to the burden. Mother is hale and hearty yet."

"She *is*," pointedly acquiesced Sir Dene. "I have just said so, Mrs. Barber."

He looked at his watch. Mary Barber took the hint and rose. Sir Dene politely opened the door for her.

She stood still, and curtsied to him. And then—as she was passing out—turned and clasped her gloved hands beseechingly.

"Oh, sir, I hope you'll please to think kindly of it! I could hardly pray more earnestly to God—as He hears and knows—than I pray to you for this boon. She has no one living to take her part but me, or to speak a word for her. Be merciful to her, in this her old age, and let her stay! She may not stand in your way very long. God will reward you for it, Sir Dene! and she will pray for blessings on you every night and morning of the few poor years of her remaining life."

Hard, matter-of-fact Mary Barber had never spoken such words in all her days; never perhaps been so nearly moved by emotion. After they came forth she stood a moment looking at him, expecting perhaps some hopeful answer. But none came. Sir Dene Clanwaring steeled ear and heart to the petition.

"I am sorry this should have occurred, Mrs. Barber. In entering upon a fresh estate, one has to expect, I suppose, disputes and vexations. If I gave in to this exaction, others would no doubt arise; therefore, I must be firm in my own defence. Good afternoon, ma'am."

Mary Barber, feeling that she had bitterly failed, went straight back to her mother's cottage. There, her bonnet and shawl taken off, her skirt and sleeves turned up, and the largest apron the place afforded tied round her, she instituted a thorough search for the missing paper. And found it not.

But Sir Dene Clanwaring, even whilst giving the last decisive answer, said to himself in his heart of hearts that he would sleep upon it. And he did so.

And a very sound sleep it was. For he dropped off the instant he got into bed, and was awakened in the morning by his hot water. During the process of shaving, he decided that Mrs. Barber, *née* Drew, was what her distant relative, his bailiff, was fond of calling her— an obstinate, cantankerous, troublesome old woman, who must not be allowed to stand in the light of himself and her neighbours.

And that the road should be made.

### CHAPTER III.

MARIA OWEN.

It was a wild night. Clouds chased each other across the sky, darkening the face of the moon ; the wind swept along in fitful gusts with a rush and a whirl, dying away in sobbing, sighing sounds.

Stealing up Harebell Lane with steps that seemed to fear their own echo, went two men carrying between them a bulky parcel, to all appearance remarkably heavy for its size. They had smock-frocks thrown over their ordinary attire, and hats slouched low on their faces. A casual passer-by would have taken them for labourers, tramping home wearily after a day's ploughing : a keener observer, accustomed to living amongst rustics, might have seen how uneasily those smock-frocks were worn, and divined instinctively that they were assumed for a purpose.

"Bear your own weight o' the load, Geach, and be hanged to ye," growled one, who was short and compact, to his taller helpmate.

"And don't I bear it?" carelessly retorted the other, whose accent was somewhat superior to his companion's.

The parcel, or bundle, its outside covering of canvas, might have been supposed to contain garments, rather untidily rolled together. In the strong cord confining it were two loops at either end, by which the men carried it.

"Change hands, Robson."

They had gone a few paces further when Geach spoke, and were close to the gates leading to Beechhurst Dene. Voices and steps, as if advancing from the Dene, at this moment became audible ; and the men, in the act of changing hands, started. A moment's pause : then Geach pushed his comrade into the ditch under the hedge, without the smallest compunction, and the bundle upon him.

"Keep dark for your life, Robson !" he breathed. "Hang that moon !"

The offending moon, left bright by a departing cloud, was not apostrophized by so innocent a word ; but the language really used by these men could not appear in polite literature. Possibly, believing himself too tall for any hedge or ditch to conceal him, Geach noiselessly leaped to the other side of the land, and then went on with a sauntering gait, whistling a rustic song. Two people emerged from the grounds of Beechhurst Dene.

"Good-night t'ye, master," he said in the rough Worcestershire dialect.

"Good-night, my man," heartily responded Geoffry Clanwaring, who made one of the two ; the other being Simmons, his father's young gamekeeper. And they passed down the lane out of sight and hearing.

With some grumbling and growling, the man called Robson got out of the ditch, which, fortunately for him, was tolerably dry. Taking the parcel between them as before, they stole on, Robson still growling.

"Tell ye, Geach, this lane ain't the place it used to be," he muttered. "What with these new folk at the Dene and their crowd o' servants, and that farmer in Mosey Black's farm, I'll be smothered if I call it safe."

"Where's the danger ?" airily responded Geach.

"Danger ! Take to-night. If they two had pounced upon us before we'd time to get it into the ditch, they might ha' turned curious eyes on it. One was Sir Dene's son ; t'other the keeper. I knew their voices."

"Well ? They'd have seen a bundle of—anything—and two tired labourers tramping home to their night's rest. What of that ? Before there can be danger, there must be suspicion :

and I'll take my oath there's none of that abroad yet. You were always a croaker."

"I'm right, for all that," grumbled Robson. "The road here is not the lone way it was; and danger may come of it."

"Better hold your tongue just now. There may be ears behind that hedge of Owen's."

It was good advice and they went on in silence. Near the pond, Geach again demanded a change of hands. He was a tall, upright, apparently strong young man, yet his arms seemed to grow tired quickly. Robson remarked upon it.

"I had a bad fall a week ago, and my bones haven't done aching yet," explained Geach, in a whisper.

What with the natural gloominess of the lane, and the densely black cloud covering the moon, for some minutes it had been safely dark. A sudden change occurred as they were changing hands: the moon shone out, causing the spot where they now stood to be almost as light as day. Robson, his mind not altogether at ease and his eyes roving, suddenly saw some object leaning over the fence above the pond. Was it a man? Starting back a step involuntarily, he muttered a low sound of caution. Geach was always prepared. Pushing the bundle into the arms of his companion—who slightly staggered under the unexpected weight—he began whistling again, as they walked on like two unconcerned rustics.

Yes, it was a man; and one they recognized. There shone the seal-skin cap, tipped with white fur, and the whiter beard of Robert Owen. He was evidently watching them openly. They would have gone on, pretending not to see him, but that a rather sharp cough took Mr. Owen at the same moment; and they could not assume not to hear. Geach stopped his whistling, and turned to speak.

"Can ye tell us, master, whether we be in the right road for Bransford?"

"For Bransford? Why, that's a long way off," returned Mr. Owen. "You'll have to wind about a bit, my men, and traverse some cross-country before you reach Bransford. Where do you come from?"

"Worcester last."

“Worcester ! Then, why did you not take the Bransford road direct—if Bransford you want ?”

“Missed our way. Thank ye, *master*.”

Resuming his whistling, and touching his hat by way of salutation, Geach walked on. Robson had not stopped.

Mr. Owen stretched himself over the fence to look after them, until they were hidden by the winding of the lane. Geach knew, almost by intuition, that they were being watched. A very emphatic curse broke from his lips.

“What did I tell ye ?” whispered Robson. “The Trailing Indian’s not as safe as it was. It may have to shift its quarters.”

“Not it !” retorted Geach. “Black can take care of himself ; and of you too.”

“Well, it’s a new thing to be watched like this in Harebell Lane. I don’t like it, Geach ; I can tell ye that.”

A short time, and they arrived at that solitary hostelry : a low, two-storied old house with gables, and a swinging sign-board, on the left-hand side of the lane as they walked up. The turnpike road, that terminated the lane, was within view. It has already been said that the Trailing Indian professed to derive its support from chance travellers.

With the exception of one candle, standing in a casement, the inn presented a dark appearance—which for an inn looked very inhospitable. Entering the yard, letting the parcel fall gently to the ground, Geach gave three distinct knocks on the side door, and then tapped at the window. The candle was removed, and a man’s head appeared.

“Who’s knocking at my window ?”

“Me and Robson. Open the door, Kandy.”

Mr. Black hastened to do so. Amongst his friends—and foes too—his Christian name was familiarly converted into Randy : it was easier than “Randolf.” He was a tall, swarthy man of five or six-and-thirty, with a sinister look in his dark face. Taking up the bundle in his arms, he led the way through passages to a remote room, closed in with shutters : not a room of general entertainment, one private to himself. The men took off their smock-frocks, and the landlord called about him. A little woman, once very pretty, but pale, sad-eyed, and subdued to meekness by terror long since, appeared in answer to his call. It was Mrs. Black.



"Get supper at once; and put a good log on the parlour fire," said Black, imperiously. "Don't be a month over it: and knock at the door when supper's ready."

Excepting an ostler, who slept over the stables, and was on very close terms with his master, no servant was kept. The ostler would give help sometimes, otherwise Mrs. Black had to do all the domestic work. It was not overwhelming in a general way; bonâ-fide travellers at the inn were few and far between. For all the profit they brought, its master might have closed his shutters.

The inn had a bad reputation, though the suspicions cast on it were of a vague nature. Sailors and boatmen occasionally made their way to it from barges coming up the Severn, striking across country from the river by night; and it was thought their inflated appearance indicated concealed brandy-skins and tobacco. Smuggling was largely pursued in those days, and was profitable. It is possible that Mr. Black dealt in other things: that his house possessed safe hiding-places where booty, the proceeds of robberies in town and country, might be stowed away in safety until the hue-and-cry was over. These men, at any rate, sitting round the table to-night, were neither sailors nor boatmen. A tale was current in the neighbourhood that a traveller had disappeared at this inn in a mysterious manner. It was a pedlar, tramping the country with rather valuable wares. That he had called in at the Trailing Indian for refreshment one summer evening, was certain, intending afterwards to proceed on his way to Worcester by moonlight. The landlord, the ostler, and Mrs. Black, all declared that he had so proceeded: and there was no proof to the contrary. However it may have been, the pedlar had not turned up at Worcester; and had never been seen or heard of since.

There was only one candle on the table, but the articles Mr. Black was feasting his eyes upon, shone as brightly as though they had been illumined by lime light. Massive articles of solid silver, some few of gold: packed compactly, no wonder that the two men had found them somewhat heavy. Geach was a fair, good-looking young man, his features small, excepting the nose, which was high, shapely, and prominent.

Born to a better station, evil courses had brought him down in the world. Robson had a close, contracted expression of countenance. They were relating the encounter with Farmer Owen.

"It won't do, you know, Black, to be watched by him," cried Robson, savagely. "If he is to pass his nights haunting the lane, the sooner the Trailing Indian knows it the better."

"I wish Sir Dene Clanwaring had been sunk in the sea before refusing to lease me the farm in Mosey's place!" exclaimed Black. "He is going to cut a hollow somewhere now to bring up waggons and carts quicker from Hurst Leet! As if we wanted more ways up here!"

"A cutting's not much harm, Randy. Owen *is*."

"Owen had better keep himself and his eyes to his own affairs; he may find himself in the wrong box if he attempts to look after mine," was Mr. Randy's comment. "The outcry's pretty hot, I hear, at Worcester."

Geach laughed. "Nothing less than a gang from London, they say."

"I can't think how he could have been standing," resumed Robson, presently, returning to the subject of Farmer Owen—for the encounter seemed to have made a most unpleasant impression on him. "The fence is right against the trees."

"No, it's not," said Black; "there's a strip of pathway between. And my brother Mosey was fool enough to take it as a short cut to the two-acre meadow. Owen has some sheep there; and now the lambing season's on, he or the shepherd is everlastingly with 'em at night. One or the other's sure to be out."

"But why halt in the pathway and put his ugly beard over the fence to watch the lane?" contended Robson. "What's it for, Randy?"

"How the devil should I know?" retorted Randy. "Lend a hand, you two."

The articles had been placed in a box. Black then opened a closet in the room, which had apparently no other exit, pushed up one of its panels, and passed through the aperture, Robson and the box disappearing after him. Soon after they were back again, and the closet door and panel had been

made fast, Mrs. Black knocked to say supper was waiting in the parlour, and the three went out to it.

We must return to Geoffry Clanwaring. Passing down the lane with the gamekeeper, seeing nothing and suspecting nothing of the man hidden in the ditch, he had reached the end of the lane, when two people were observed approaching, one of whom was laughing gaily. A sweet, silvery laugh, that a little stirred the pulses of Mr. Geoffry; for it was Maria Owen's. She had been spending the afternoon at Hurst Leet, and was returning attended by the house servant—a stout, red-cheeked damsel named Joan. Maria wore her gipsy cloak, its scarlet hood drawn round her face and her pretty curls.

Geoffry Clanwaring turned back with Miss Owen; the keeper pursued his way onwards, straight down the road. Arrived at Mr. Owen's gate, they stood to talk, and Joan went in.

"Mamma was to have gone to tea with me, but she did not feel well enough this afternoon; so they sent Joan to bring me home," explained Maria, chattering and blushing, her heart beating wildly for love of the handsome young man before her. He could see the rosy dimples in the moonlight, the sweet eyes, cast down beneath his gaze. Every fibre within him thrilled in answer, for she was more to him than—ay, almost than heaven.

Love is no respecter of persons; the fitness of things never enters into the fickle god's calculations. Between Geoffry Thomas Clanwaring and Maria Owen lay miles of that exacting gulf called social position; nevertheless, they had contrived to lapse into a passion for each other, than which nothing could be more pure and ardent. Part them, and the whole world would be to each as a wilderness.

Sir Dene had three sons. The heir was altogether a fine gentleman, living chiefly in London, amidst his clubs, his gaieties, and his friends. The youngest was a soldier, already married, and serving in India. Geoffry, the second, remained at home, looking after things on the estate, making himself quite as useful as Drew the bailiff. Geoffry might generally be seen in velvet shooting-coat and leathern or beaver leggings, tramping about on foot, or riding on horseback, always busy.

It was whispered by Gander, a servant who had lived with them for many years, that Sir Dene liked him the best of all his sons. The heir was cold and proud; the soldier improvident and ill-tempered; Geoffry alone had never given anything but dutiful affection to his father. Out and about the land daily, it was thus he had formed the acquaintance of Robert Owen and his family; and it had become quite an ordinary matter now for Geoffry Clanwaring to run in and out of Harebell Farm at will.

"What were you laughing at, Maria?" he asked, as they stood at the gate. "You and Joan?"

"I was laughing at Joan. She had been telling me a tale of a sweetheart she had in her last place. It was the carter, and he gave her up because she threw a can of buttermilk over him in a temper. Joan says he was only angry because he happened to have on a clean smock-frock; had it been a dirty one, he wouldn't have minded."

Geoffry laughed.

"Mr. Clanwaring, I must go in. Mamma will be sending out for me."

"I saw George Arde to-day," he resumed, paying no attention to the hint except that he held her hand a little tighter—for it lay in his.

"Oh, did you. Where?"

"In Worcester. I went in about the sale of some barley, and met him in High Street."

"Did he say anything about Mary?"

"No. Except that she was very delicate just now."

"Mary is always delicate."

"When are you going over there next, Maria?"

"I don't know," she replied in low, half-conscious tones. For the truth was, that whenever she did go to Worcester, Mr. Geoffry invariably contrived to find his way there on the self-same day.

Thus they lingered talking of one thing and another, oblivious of the lapse of time, and Maria continuing to run the risk of being sent for. No one came, however, for the best of all possible reasons— it was not known she was there. Mrs. Owen and Mary Barber were at work together in the

parlour, and Joan did not disturb them to announce her entrance. The girl, experienced in the matter of sweethearts herself, knew what was what. But the time was really getting on.

"There has been an audacious robbery of gold and silver plate at one of the silversmiths," observed Geoffry, suddenly remembering it. "Worcester was up in arms: and the Bow Street runners are down."

"What a pity!" she cried. "I hope the thieves won't come near us. Indeed, Geoffry, I must go indoors."

Placing her hand within his arm, he walked with her up the path and round to the front, slowly enough. At the garden-gate between the tall holly hedge they halted again. There was not the slightest necessity for this: it was not the way indoors; rather, a few steps out of it. Perhaps the truth was, that one was just as ready to make an excuse for lingering as the other. The garden shone out fitfully in the night: just now it was dark, for the moon again lay under a black cloud. Not five minutes since, another black cloud had cleared away.

Very dark. It might have been for that reason that Geoffry Clanwaring, leaning forward on the gate, threw his arm round Maria, and drew her to him.

"I *must* go in," she whispered.

For answer, he turned up the sweet face, so lovely in its scarlet hood, and took a kiss from the lips. And then another.

"Oh, Geoffry!"

"Now you shall go in, my darling—as it must be."

The moon came out, flooding the garden and trees and house with her light. Another moment's lingering ensued. broken in upon by Mr. Owen himself. He saw his daughter run in; saw Geoffry standing there: and he seized the opportunity to say what had been in his mind for some days past. Namely: that, though his house was pleased and proud to receive the visits of his landlord's son, there must be no approach to intimacy with Maria.

"I understand," said Geoffry, after a pause. "Would you object to me, Mr. Owen?"

"Some one else would object, sir; and that's quite enough for me," was Robert Owen's answer.

"Who else?"

"Mr. Clanwaring, you must know who, better than I can tell you. Your father, Sir Dene."

"Maria is one that a prince might be proud to marry," said Geoffry, foolishly impulsive.

Upon that, Mr. Owen spoke; and very sensibly. Unequal marriages never did good in the end, he said. Moreover, he could not, and would not, have both his daughters wedding above their proper station.

"Your eldest daughter has not wedded above her station," said Geoffry, resentfully.

"Indeed she has. You must see it for yourself."

"I'm sure George Arde is poor enough, Mr. Owen."

"Too poor. But he's a gentleman. And—suppose he were ever to come into Arde Hall? Not that there is much chance of it."

"Not the least chance. Old Arde says he shall never leave it to either kith or kin—the old skinflint! It would be a jolly good thing for George Arde and his wife if they had it."

"Well, I would rather Mary had married in her own station—a farmer, for instance, such as I am. But, with regard to you, Mr. Clanwaring, there must be no thought of anything of the kind. Your father would never forgive you."

"If my father approved, would you approve, Mr. Owen?"

"Pardon me, but that's a very useless question. Sir Dene never would approve."

"You can answer it for my own satisfaction," returned Geoffry, his pleasant good-natured eyes going out beseechingly to the farmer's. "If things were otherwise favourable, and Sir Dene were willing, do you think well enough of me to give me Maria?"

"Yes, I do," was the honest answer. "I like you very much. But that's quite beside the question, Mr. Clanwaring, as you well know, and we must return to the starting-point. There must be no intimacy between you and Maria. If I saw any approach to anything of the sort, I should feel it my duty to Sir Dene to forbid you my house."

"Very well; perhaps you are right," answered Geoffry, slowly coming to reason. "I confess that I do like Maria, very much; but I should not care to bring trouble upon any



one; least of all on my father. Time may alter things. Good-night, Owen."

"You are not offended with me for my plain speaking?" said the farmer, as he met Geoffry's offered hand.

"Offended! Indeed, no. You have only done what a straightforward man would do. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Geoffry Clanwaring ran off. He had told the gamekeeper to "go on slowly," and he would catch him up. They had a matter of business in hand to-night in the village—of which he had lost sight whilst lingering with Maria. At the corner which bounded the lane he halted a moment, half inclined to turn down the road to the right and dash into the pathway opposite the Dene gates. But, as he knew the keeper had taken the road—for he had to call at the farrier's and might be waiting there—he went straight on.

A rather lonely, narrow, and very hilly road, this, only a cross-country road at best; no stage-coaches ever passed down it. Geoffry went up one hill and down another; the way insensibly winding round always towards the village. In fact, to go from a given point, say the entrance to Arde Hall, right round to Hurst Leet, the highway described a horse-shoe circuit of two miles. At the beginning of the lower turning, which brought the village straight onward in the distance, stood the premises of the farrier and horse-doctor. Cole was at work in the shed, and Geoffry went up to it.

"Has Simmons been here, Cole?"

"Yes, sir; about half-an-hour ago. He called in to say that one of the horses was ill, and I'm to be up the first thing in the morning."

"Mind you are. It's Sir Dene's hunter. Good-night."

He went straight on to the village, passing sundry dwellings, most of them labourers' cottages, on either side of the road, and arrived at Hurst Leet. Simmons, however, was not to be found anywhere, and Geoffry Clanwaring had had a fruitless walk.

But it has afforded us an opportunity of seeing the road that Sir Dene was waging warfare with, and was projecting this new cutting to avoid—to be called henceforward, as the reader will find, Dene Hollow.

## CHAPTER IV.

## IN THE LIFE OF MARY BARBER.

THIS chapter contains an experience that may almost be called the chief event of Mary Barber's life. It occurred some years before the epoch we are at present concerned with, and was essentially supernatural. Not an incident born of the imagination, but a reality—at least as far as the actors and witnesses connected with it believed. The facts were peculiar, and for my own part I do not see how they could be reasonably accounted for, or explained away. The details are given with simple and exact truth, just as they happened.

The Owens were not then living at Harebell Farm, but at a few miles' distance across country, in the rural village of Hallow. Their dwelling-house was commodious: and Mary Barber was the ruling power, under her mistress. Mrs. Owen, delicate then, as always, was not capable of active management.

One Monday afternoon in September, Mrs. Owen was seated alone in her parlour, mending muslins and laces in preparation for the next day's wash, when the door opened and Mary Barber came in, neat as usual, though inexpensive, her attire superior in appearance to an ordinary servant. She must have been fairly young then—six-and-thirty, perhaps—yet looked middle-aged.

"I've come to ask a fine thing, ma'am, and I don't know what you'll say to me," she began, in her strong country accent. "I want a holiday to-morrow."

"A holiday!" repeated Mrs. Owen, in evident surprise. "Why, Mary, to-morrow's washing-day."

"Aye, no one knows that better than I do. But my sister has come over about this wedding of Richard's. Nothing will do but I must go to it. She talks a lot of nonsense; saying it should be the turning-point in our coolness, the healer of dissensions, and she won't go to church unless I go. As to dissensions," slightly added Mary Barber, "she's thinking of the two boys, not of me."

"Well, Mary, I suppose you must go."

"I wouldn't, ma'am, but that she seems to make so much of it. I hardly ever saw Hester so much in earnest before. It's very silly of her. From the first I said I would not go. What do those grand Laws want with me—or Richard either? No, indeed! I never thought they'd get me to it—let alone the wash!"

"But you do wish to go, Mary?" returned Mrs. Owen, scarcely comprehending.

"Well, you see, now Hester herself has come, making this fuss, I hardly like to hold out. They'd call me more obstinate than ever—and that needn't be. So, ma'am, I suppose you must spare me for a few hours. I'll get things forward before I start in the morning, and be back early in the afternoon; I shan't want to stop with 'em; not I."

"Very well, Mary; we shall manage, I dare say. Ask Mrs. Pickering to come in and see me before she goes. Perhaps she'll stay and take tea with me."

"Not she," replied Mary: "she's all in a flurry to get back again. Richard and William are coming home early, she says."

Mary Barber shut the door, and returned to the room she had left—a great barn of a room, where the children were accustomed to play. Mary was regarded more as a friend than a servant, but did the work of two. She was generally called "Mary Barber," one of the children being named Mary. On Mrs. Owen's sick days, Mary would shut herself up with the children in this remote room, and keep them quiet, leaving the work to be done without her.

Mrs. Pickering was older by some years than Mary. The two sisters were much alike, tall, sensible-looking, hard-featured women, with large, well-formed foreheads, and honest, steady grey eyes. But Mrs. Pickering looked ill and careworn. She wore a violet silk gown, a dark Paisley shawl, and Leghorn bonnet. Mary Barber had been regarding the attire in silent condemnation; excepting her one best gown, *she* possessed nothing but cottons.

"Well, Hester, the mistress says she'll spare me," was her announcement. "But as to getting over in time for

church, I don't know that I can do it. There'll be a thousand and one things to do to-morrow morning, and I shall stop and put forward."

"You might get over in time if you would, Mary."

"Perhaps I might, and perhaps I mightn't," was the short answer. "It's a five weeks' wash; and the missis is as poorly as she can be. Hester, it's just this: I don't want to come. I *will* come, as you make such a clatter about it, and I'll eat a bit of wedding-cake, and drink a glass of wine to their good luck; but as to sitting down to breakfast with the Laws and their grand company, it's not to be supposed I would do it. I know my place better. Neither would the Laws want me to."

"They said they'd welcome you."

"I dare say they did!" returned Mary; "but they'd think me a fool if I went, for all that. I shouldn't mind seeing 'em married, though, and I'll get over to the church, if I can. Anyway, I'll be in time to drink their health before they start on their journey."

Mrs. Pickering rose, knowing it was useless to say any more. She wished the children good-bye, went to Mrs. Owen's parlour for a few minutes, absolutely declining refreshment, and then prepared to walk home again. Mary attended her to the door.

"What are you going to wear to-morrow?" she suddenly demanded.

"Mrs. Pickering laughed. "Something very smart, but I can't stay to tell you."

"You've bought a gown on purpose for it, I reckon," continued Mary, detaining her. "What sort is it?"

"A new fawn silk. There! Good-bye; I've a great deal to do to-night, and the boys are coming home to an early tea."

Mrs. Pickering walked away quickly, as she spoke. Mary Barber, enjoining the two pretty girls and little Tom to be quiet, and not go in to tease their mamma, ran to the village shop to see if by good luck she could find there some white satin bonnet ribbon. William Owen, the eldest son, was at school at Worcester.

Rather to Mary Barber's surprise, Mrs. Smith produced a

roll of white satin, encased in cap-paper. She didn't always have such a thing by her, she said. Mary Barber bought four yards—some narrow ribbon to match, for her cap border—and set off home again.

Mrs. Pickering walked rapidly homewards. Hallow was situated about three miles from Worcester, and her house was between the two—though nearer the city than the village. After Hester Barber's marriage, her husband had got on in the world. A cottage and a couple of fields and a cow grew into—at least the fields did—many fields, and they into hop-gardens. From being a successful hop-grower, John Pickering took an office in Worcester, and became a prosperous hop-merchant. He placed his two sons in it—well-educated youths; and on his death, his eldest son Richard, then just twenty-one, succeeded him. This was four years ago. Richard was to be married on the morrow to Helena Law, daughter of John Law, the surgeon; and Mary Barber as you have heard, considered she should be out of place at the festivities.

And she was right. Over and over again had the Pickerings urged Mary to leave service, as beneath her and themselves, and take up her abode with them. Mary declined. As to living with them, she retorted, they knew as well as she did there would be no "getting on" together; and help to set up rooms for herself, or a cottage, was what *she* would never accept. She said it was "their pride"; they said they only wanted her to be more comfortable. The contention ran on for years; in fact, was continually running on quietly, if it did not always rise to the surface; and the result was a coldness, and very infrequent meetings. Mary Barber remained in servitude, and was called obstinate for her pains.

Not so much so, however, by Mrs. Pickering, who understood very little of the world's social distinctions, and cared for them less; and she had latterly had a great trouble upon her, beside which few things seemed of weight to her. For some time past there had been ill-feeling between her two sons: in her heart perhaps she most loved the younger, and, as far as she dared, took his part against the elder. Richard was master, and overbearing; William was four years younger, and resented his brother's yoke. Richard was steady, and

regular as clock-work ; William was rather given to going out of an evening, wasting time and money. Trifling sums had been missed from the office by Richard, from time to time ; he was as convinced that William had helped himself to them as that they had disappeared, but William coolly denied it, and set down the accusation to his brother's prejudice. In point of fact, this was chiefly the origin of the ill-feeling ; but Richard Pickering was considerate, and had kept the petty thefts secret from his mother. She, poor woman, fondly hoped this marriage of Richard's would heal all wounds, though not clearly seeing how or in what manner it could bear upon them. In one month William would be of age, and must become his brother's partner ; he would also come into his share of the property left by their father.

Mrs. Pickering went home ruminating on these things, and praying — oh how earnestly ! — that there should be peace between the brothers. Their house was surrounded by fields ; a very pretty though small dwelling of bright red brick, with outside green venetian shutters ; jasmine trailed over the porch, over the sills of the sitting-room windows, on either side the entrance-door. Flowers clustered round the green lawn in front ; and behind was a fold-yard on a very small scale, for they kept cows, and poultry, and pigs still. The land was somewhat low just here, and no glimpse of the Severn, winding in front between its banks, could be caught ; but there was the fair city of Worcester beyond, with its fine cathedral, and the tapering spire of St. Andrew's rising high against the blue sky.

The young Pickerings came home early that evening, as agreed upon : not, alas ! in the friendly spirit their mother had been hoping for, but openly quarrelling. They were both tall, fine young men, with good features, dark hair, and their mother's honest, sensible grey eyes ; Richard was grave in expression ; William gay, with the pleasantest smile in the world. Poor Mrs. Pickering ! Hasty words were spoken on either side, and for the first time she became acquainted with the losses at the office, and Richard's belief in his brother's dishonesty. It appeared that a far heavier loss than any preceding it had been discovered that afternoon,



"Oh, Richard!" she gasped; "you don't know what you are saying. He would never do it."

"He has done it, mother—he must have done it," was the elder son's answer. "No one else can gain access to my desk excepting old Stone. Would you have me suspect him?"

"Old Stone" was a faithful servant, their many-years clerk and manager, altogether beyond suspicion, and there was no one else in the office. Mrs. Pickering felt a faintness stealing over her, but she had firm faith in her younger, her bright, well-beloved son.

"See here, mother," said Richard; "we know—at least I do, if you don't—that William's expenditure has been considerably beyond his salary. Whence has he derived the sums of money he has spent—that he does not deny having spent? If I have kept these things from you, it was to save you pain: Stone has urged me to tell you of it over and over again."

"Hush, Richard! The money came from me."

William Pickering turned round; he had been carelessly standing at the window, looking out on the setting sun. For once his pleasant smile had given place to scorn.

"I wouldn't have told him so much, mother: *I* never have. If he is capable of casting this suspicion on me, why not let him enjoy it. Over and over again have I assured him I never touched a sixpence of the money: I've told that interfering old Stone so; and I might as well talk to the wind. Is it likely that I would touch it? I could have knocked the old man down this afternoon when he accused me of being a disgrace to my dead father."

But it is unnecessary to pursue the quarrel. That Mrs. Pickering had privately furnished William with money from time to time was indisputable, and Richard could not doubt his mother's word. But instead of its clearing up the matter, it only (so judged Richard) made it more complicated. If he had robbed the office, he had been legally robbing his mother; words grew higher and more bitter, and the brothers, in their anger, spoke of a separation. This evening, the last of Richard's residence at home, was the most miserable his mother had ever

spent, and she passed a great part of the night at her bedside, praying that the matter might be cleared up, and the brothers reconciled to each other.

The morning rose bright and cloudless ; and Mary Barber was early astir. Washing-day in those days, and in a simple country household, meant a great deal. It most certainly did at Mrs. Owen's ; every one was expected to work, and did work, the master excepted. Mary put her shoulder to the wheel that morning, got things forward, and started about ten o'clock. The wedding was fixed for eleven at All Saints' Church, and Mary calculated that she should get comfortably to church just before the hour, and ensconce herself in an obscure corner, as she meant to do.

She was dressed in her best. A soft, fine, grey cashmere gown, kept for high-days, a grey twilled silk shawl with a handsome border of lilies and roses, and a cottage straw bonnet trimmed with the white satin ribbon and bordered with real lace. That shawl had been a present to Mary for her own wedding (which had been rudely frustrated through the faithlessness of man, and terribly sore was she upon it to this day), and was as good as new, seldom appearing more than once a year. She brought no cap with her, intending to be firm on the point of not remaining and not removing her bonnet ; would step into Mr. Law's house, drink the health of the bridegroom and bride, taste the cake, and start homewards again.

She chose the field way as pleasanter than the dusty road ; and went quickly on with her cotton umbrella, a large green affair. The skies were cloudless, there seemed no prospect of rain for days to come, but Mary Barber would not have ventured out in her best things without an umbrella for untold gold.

She had traversed nearly two-thirds of her way, and was in the last field but one before turning into the road. It was a large field, popularly called the hollow field, from the circumstance of a depression being in one part of it. This Mary Barber had left behind her, and as she walked down the path that led through it, some church clocks chiming half-past ten came distinctly to her ear in the stillness of the air.

It was at this moment that she discerned some one seated on the stile at the end of the path leading into the next field.

Very much to her surprise, as she advanced nearer, she saw it was her sister. Mrs. Pickering was sitting on the side towards Worcester, but with her face turned towards Mary, as if she were waiting for her, and would not take the trouble to get over. To use a common expression, Mary Barber could hardly believe her eyes, and the proceeding by no means met with her approbation.

"Of all the simpletons! -to come there to wait for me. And for all she knew I might have taken the road way. They're thinking to get me to church in the carriage, but they won't. I told her I wouldn't mix myself up with the grand doings; and Hester's common sense must have gone wool-gathering to wish it. Ah! she's been hurrying herself into that stitch in her side."

The last remark was caused by perceiving that Mrs. Pickering had her hand pressed to her heart. The doctors had warned Mrs. Pickering that any exertion by which this pain was brought on might be dangerous. "Serve her right!" cried unsympathizing Mary Barber, who had no patience with people who did foolish things.

And now she obtained a clear view of her sister's dress: the violet silk gown of the previous afternoon, and a white bonnet and shawl. Mary, on the whole, regarded the attire with disparagement.

"Why, she is wearing her puce gown! What can that be for? Where's the new fawn silk she talked of, I wonder? I wouldn't go to my eldest son's wedding in an old gown! That's just like Hester; she never can bear to put on a new thing. If I don't believe the shawl's one of those beautiful *Chancé*, *crêpes*."

It looked a very good shawl as it glistened in the sun. That it was a *China crêpe* was certain; no other shawl would have so deep a fringe. *China crêpe* shawls in those days were costly; and Mary Barber condemned it at once, as connected with her sister.

"Hester," she called out, as soon as she was sufficiently near for her voice to reach the stile, "what on earth made you come here to meet me?"

Mrs. Pickering made no reply, gave no sign of recognition, and Mary supposed she had not heard. Her face looked unusually pale, its expression mournful and serious, its eyes turned on Mary with a fixed stare,

"Surely," thought Mary, "nothing can have happened to stop the wedding! Richard's bride wouldn't run away as that faithless swain of mine did. Something's wrong, though, by her staring at me in that stony way, and never opening her mouth. Hester, I say, is anything—— There go those strings again!"

The concluding apostrophe was addressed to her shoe-strings. To be smart, Mary Barber had put new galloon ribbon in her shoes, and one or other had been coming untied all the way, to her great wrath. Placing her umbrella and folded handkerchief on the grass, she stooped and tied the shoe, giving the knot a good tug as additional security.

"Now, then, come undone again, and—— Bless me! where's she gone?"

In raising her head, Mary Barber missed her sister; the stile was vacant. Hastening to it, she climbed over into the next field, and stood there in utter astonishment, for no trace whatever was to be seen of Mrs. Pickering. It was a large field, a hedge dividing it from the one she had just traversed. She looked everywhere in vain. Mary Barber had once treated herself to the performance of a conjuror in the large room of the Bell, at Worcester, and began to think he must have been at work here.

"Hester!" she called, raising her voice to its utmost extent: "Hester, where are you?"

The air carried away the sound, but there was no answer. The women stood as one moonstruck. What could it mean? The trim, well-kept hedge afforded no chance of concealment; there was nothing but the broad open field, no human being, excepting herself, within it.

"Well, this beats bull-baiting," ejaculated Mary Barber, in the broad country phraseology of those days. "I'd better pinch myself to see whether I am awake or dreaming."

She went back over the stile to the field she had traversed, and gazed around; but no trace could she see of Mrs. Pickering. Finally she passed over the stile again, and stood for a moment revolving matters.

"She must have run off somewhere while my eyes were on that shoe," was the conclusion the woman came to. "And

more idiot she, when she knows running always brings on that queer pain at her heart."

It might have been a reasonable solution had the field not been too broad to admit of her disappearing. In truth there was no such possibility. Mary Barber continued her way across the field, and then, instead of pursuing her road to Worcester, turned aside to the house of the Pickerings. That her sister could not have got back to it she knew, for the only way was the one she had taken. Trying the back door she found it fastened, and, on passing round to the front, that was fastened also. There was no carriage waiting at the gate ; on the contrary, everything seemed silent and shut up. Mary Barber gave a sharp knock.

"One would think you were all dead," she cried, as a maid-servant opened the door. "They are gone, I suppose?"

"Yes, they are gone," was the servant's reply. "My mistress left about ten minutes since."

"More than that, I know," returned Mary Barber. "What made her come to meet me, Betsy?"

"She didn't come," said Betsy.

"She did come," retorted Mary Barber.

"She did not, ma'am," persisted the servant.

"Why, goodness me, girl! do you want to persuade me out of my senses?" retorted Mary in anger. "She came on as far as the hollow field, and sat down on the stile there waiting for me to come up. I've the use of my eyes, I hope."

"Well, I don't know, ma'am," returned the girl, dubiously. "I was with her at the moment she was starting, and I'm sure she'd no thought of meeting you then. She was just going out at this door when she turned back into the parlour and put down her green parasol, telling me to bring her small silk umbrella instead: it might rain, she said, fair as it looked. 'And make haste,' she said to me, 'for it don't want two minutes of the half-hour, and I shan't reach All Saints' in time.'"

"What half-hour?" asked Mary Barber, in hard, disputing tones.

"The half-hour after ten. Sure enough in a minute or two our clock struck it."

"Your clock must be uncommon wrong in its reckoning, then," was the woman's rejoinder. "At half-past ten she was on the stile, looking out for me. It's about ten minutes ago."

It was about ten minutes since her mistress went out: but Betsy did not venture upon further contention. Mary Barber always put down those who differed from her.

After all, she has not taken her umbrella," resumed the girl. "I couldn't find it in the stand, by the kitchen; all the rest of the umbrellas were there, but not missis's silk one, and when I ran back to tell her I thought it must be upstairs, she had gone. At a fine pace, too, which, you know, is not good for her, for she was already out of sight. So I just shut the door, and drew the bolt. It's a pity she drove it off so late."

"What made her drive it off?"

"Well, one or two reasons. Her new fawn gown was never sent home till this morning, and when missis had it on, it wouldn't come to in the waist by the breadth of an inch, and she had her pain very bad, and couldn't be squeezed. So she had to take it off again, and put on her puce——"

"I saw," cried Mary Barber, cutting short the revelation. "Betsy, what's her shawl? It looked to me like one of them Chaney crêpes."

"The most lovely Chaney crêpe you ever saw," replied the girl, enthusiastically. "Mr. Richard made it a present to her. She didn't want to wear it; said it was too grand, but he laughed at her. The fringe was that depth."

"And now, you obstinate thing," sharply put in Mary Barber, "how could I have seen her puce gown, and how could I have seen her shawl unless she had come to meet me? I should as soon have expected to see myself in a satin train, as she in a Chaney crêpe: and Richard must have more money than wit to buy it."

"And where is she now, then?" asked Betsy, to whom the argument certainly appeared conclusive. "Gone on alone to the church?"

"Never you mind!" returned Mary Barber, not choosing to betray her ignorance upon the unsatisfactory point. "Don't contradict your betters again, Betsy Marsh."



Betsy humbly accepted the reproof.

"Why could she not have had a carriage, and gone properly?" resumed Mary Barber. "A son's marriage comes but once in a lifetime."

"The carriage came, and took off Mr. Richard, and she wouldn't go in it," said the girl. And then, dropping her voice to a whisper, she proceeded to tell of the unpleasantness of the previous evening, and the subsequent events of the morning. Mr. William was up first, and went out without breakfast, leaving word he had gone to the office as usual, and should not attend the wedding. This she had to tell her mistress and Mr. Richard when they came downstairs. Her mistress seemed dreadfully grieved; looked as white as a sheet, and as soon as breakfast was over, wrote a letter to Mr. William and sent Hill with it into Worcester. "It was to tell him to come back, and go with her to the wedding, I know," concluded the girl; "and that's why, waiting for him, she would not go with Mr. Richard when the carriage came, and why she stayed herself till the last minute. But Mr. William never came: and Hill's not back either."

"Then why on earth did she come to meet me, instead of making the best of her way to the church?" once more demanded Mary Barber. "And where—— Why, who's this?"

The closing of the little iron gate at the foot of the garden had caused her to turn, and she saw William Pickering advancing. He was flushed with the rapid walk from the town—conveyances were not to be hired at a moment's notice in Worcester in those days—and came up with a smile on his good-humoured face.

"I hope my mother's gone," he called out.

"Yes, sir," answered Betsy.

"So you and Richard have been quarrelling again, I hear, and you must go off in a temper this morning," was Mary Barber's salutation. "I'm glad you've had the grace to think better of it, Mr. William!"

The young man laughed. "The truth is, my mother's note was so peremptory—in a sort of way—that I had no choice but to obey," he answered. "I was not in the office when Hill left it, but came on as soon as I could. Some hot water, Betsy. Make haste."

"You won't get to All Saints' in time," said Mary Barber.

"I'll try for it; they may be late themselves. What time is it now?" he continued, as he bounded up the stairs.

As if in answer, the large kitchen clock at that moment rang out the quarter to eleven. The clock struck the quarters: as many kitchen clocks did in those old-fashioned days.

"Is that clock right?" asked Mary Barber, remembering her conclusion that it could not be right, and why; and still feeling in a dream about the past. "Just look at your watch, William, and tell me."

"It's never wrong," put in Betsy, as she came hurrying out of the kitchen with the jug of hot water. "It don't vary hardly a minute in a year."

This was true. Nevertheless William Pickering halted on the stairs, and took out his watch. "It is quite right," he said. "Besides, I know that must be just about the time. Wait for me in the parlour, Mary, and we'll go on together."

She turned into the parlour generally used, and waited. The boys had always called her "Mary," following the habit of their father and mother. On the table lay Mrs. Pickering's green parasol, just as she had put it down.

In five minutes he was downstairs again, dressed: as handsome a young man as you would easily find—frank and upright. Mary Barber told him how his mother had come to meet her, and had suddenly disappeared. He laughed, and said Mary must have fallen into a doze whilst tying her shoe-string. They were passing through Henwick when the clocks struck eleven.

"There!" exclaimed Mary Barber, "the ceremony will have begun!"

"Never mind," said he, gaily, "we shall come in for the end of it."

They took the lower road, as being the nearest, cutting off the corner by the suburb of St. John's, crossed the bridge over the sparkling Severn, and turned off to All Saints' Church just as the tardy bridal party drove up.

"I hope they have not been waiting for me!" exclaimed William Pickering. "Which carriage is my mother in, I wonder? I shall take her in."

"She won't be in any carriage, but was going straight to the church; Betsy said so!" snapped Mary Barber, excessively vexed to find herself in the very midst of the alighting company. Richard Pickering drew up to his brother.

"Where's the mother?" he asked. "We have been waiting for her all this time."

"In the church, I think, if not with you. I have only now come up myself."

But range their eyes as they would round the church when they were within it, there was no sign of Mrs. Pickering. William, burying animosity for the occasion, stood by his brother at the altar, as groomsman, and the ceremony proceeded. Mary Barber ensconced herself behind a remote pillar, and quietly watched the party out of the church, Richard leading his very pretty bride.

"I'll let them get into old Law's before me," quoth she to the female pew-opener.

And accordingly they did get in, and then Mary Barber followed. She supposed Mrs. Pickering would be there, as they all did. The conclusion drawn was, that she had not arrived in time for the ceremony, and so had gone straight to the surgeon's. His residence was not far from the church, and as Mary Barber slowly approached it, she saw a group of persons coming from the opposite direction, in one of whom she recognized an officer of justice. Whilst halting at the door to stare at these William Pickering came out.

"What can have become of my mother, Mary?" he exclaimed. "I'm going home to see after her. She's not at Mrs. Law's."

"Why, where can she be?" responded Mary Barber. "I'll tell you what, William," quickly added the woman, an idea flashing across her, "she's gone demented with the quarrelling of you two boys, and has wandered away in the fields! I told you how strangely she stared at me from the stile."

"Nonsense!" said the young man.

"Is it nonsense? It—— What do you people want?" broke off Mary Barber. For the group she had noticed had halted in front of them. The officer laid his arm upon William Pickering.

"I'm sorry to say that I must take you into custody, sir."

"What for?" coolly asked William.

"For murder!" was the answer. And as the terrible words fell on Mary Barber's ear, an insane thought crossed her bewildered brain. Could he have murdered his mother? Of course it was only her own previous train of thought, connected with the non-appearance of her sister that induced the wild idea.

Not so, however. Amidst the confusion that seemed at once to reign; amidst the indignant questionings of the bridal party, who came flocking out in their gay attire, the particulars were made known. Mr. Stone, the old clerk, had been found dead on the office floor, an ugly wound in the back of his head. Richard Pickering, in his terror, cast a yearning glance at his brother, as much as to say, Surely it has not come to this!

The events of the morning, as connected with this matter, appeared to have been as follows:—Mr. Stone had gone to the office at nine o'clock, as usual, and there, to his surprise, found William Pickering opening the letters. The latter said he was not going to his brother's wedding, and the old clerk reproved him for it. William did not like this; one word led to another, and several harsh things were spoken. So far testified the office servant, a man named Dance, whose work lay chiefly in the warehouse amongst the hop-pockets, and who had come in for orders. They were still quarrelling, Dance said, when he left them. Subsequently to this, William Pickering went out to the warehouse, and to one or two more places. On his return he found that his mother's outdoor factotum, Hill, had left a note for him; a large brewer in the town, named Corney, was also waiting to see him on business. When Corney left, he opened the note, the contents of which may as well be given:—

"William! you have never yet directly disobeyed me. I charge you, come back at once, and accompany me to the church. Do you know that I have passed three parts of the night on my knees, praying that things may be cleared between you and your brother!

"YOUR LOVING MOTHER."

After that nothing was clearly known. William Pickering said that when he quitted the office to go home, in obedience to his mother's mandate, he left Mr. Stone at his desk writing ; but a short time afterwards the old clerk was found lying on the floor, with a terrible wound in the back of his head. It was evident that he had been struck down whilst bending over the desk. The man Dance, who was sought for in the warehouse, and found, spoke of the quarrelling he had heard ; and hence the arrest of William Pickering.

Mary Barber's first thought, amidst the confusion, was for her sister. If not broken to her gently, the news might kill her ; and the woman, abandoning cake, wine, and company, before she had seen them, started off there and then in search of Mrs. Pickering, not knowing in the least where to look for her, but naturally taking her homeward way.

"Surely she'll be coming in to join them, and I shall perchance meet her," was her passing thought.

Not Mrs. Pickering did Mary Barber meet, but the man, Hill, coming down the road in a state of excitement, and Mary Barber stared in blank disbelief at his news. His mistress had been found in her room—dead.

In an incredibly short time the woman arrived there, and met a surgeon coming out of the house. It was quite true. Mrs. Pickering was dead. With her face looking as if it were turned to stone, Mary Barber went up to the chamber. Betsy, the servant, her tears falling fast, told the tale.

When Mary Barber and Mr. William had departed, she bolted the door again, and went back to her work in the kitchen. By-and-by, it occurred to her to wonder whether the umbrella was safe upstairs, or whether it had been lost from the stand ; a few weeks before, one of their cotton umbrellas had been taken by a tramp. She ran up into her mistress's room to look, and there was startled by seeing her sitting in an arm-chair by the bedside, her head fallen back, and her left hand pressed on her heart. On the bed lay the umbrella, its cover partly taken off. At the first moment the girl thought she was asleep ; but on looking at her face she knew it was something worse. Rushing from the house in terror, she met Hill, who was then returning from Worcester, and sent him

for the nearest surgeon. He came, and pronounced her to be quite dead. "She must have been dead," he said, "about an hour."

"What time was that?" interrupted Mary Barber, speaking sharply in her emotion.

"It was half-past eleven."

There could not be the slightest doubt as to the facts of the case. Whilst the servant was sent for the umbrella, and delayed through being unable to find it, Mrs. Pickering must have run upstairs to her chamber, either remembering that it was there, or to look for it. She found it, and, whilst taking off the case, must have felt ill, sat down on the chair, and died immediately. Her own medical attendant had warned her that any great excitement might prove suddenly fatal.

"It was the oddest thing possible, and I thought so at the time, though it went out of my mind again, that she should have gone out of sight so soon," sobbed Betsy. "I don't think I was away much above a minute and when I came back and found her gone, and looked out at the door, I couldn't see her anywhere. I looked in the garden; I looked down the path. 'Why, missis must be lost!' said I, out loud. And she had left the front-door wide open, too—and that ought to have told me she had not gone out of it. And I, like a fool, never to have remembered that she might have run upstairs, but just bolted the door and went about my work."

Mary Barber made no comment; a strange awe was stealing over her. This had occurred at half-past ten. It was precisely at that time that she saw her sister on the stile.

"Betsy," she presently said, her voice subdued to a whisper, "if your mistress had really gone out, as you supposed, was there any possibility of her coming in later, without your knowledge?"

"No, there was not; she couldn't have done it," was the answer; and Mary Barber felt perfectly certain that it had not been possible. The only way to Mrs. Pickering's from the stile was the path she had taken herself, and she knew her sister had not gone on before her.

"I never unbolted either of the doors, back or front, after she, as I thought, went out, except when I undid the front-door



for you," resumed the girl. "I don't dare to be in the house by myself with 'em open since that man frightened me last winter. No, no; missis neither went out nor came in; she just went upstairs to her room, and died. The doctor says he don't suppose she had a moment's warning."

It must have been so. Mary Barber gazed upon her as she lay there; upon her gala attire, the counterpart of what she had seen on the stile. The doctor had closed the eyes, otherwise she was as she was found. Mary Barber gazed; and an awful conviction came over her that it was her sister's spirit she had seen on the stile. Never from that hour did she quite lose the sensation of nameless dread it brought with it.

"You see, now, Mrs. Barber, you must have been mistaken in thinking my missis went to meet you," said Betsy.

Mary Barber gave no answer; she only looked out straight before her with a gaze that seemed to be very far off.

What with the one calamity and the other the house was like a fair throughout the day. Richard Pickering, bridegroom though he was, was up there; Mr. Law was there, and, on examination, confirmed the other doctor's opinion as to the sudden death; numberless friends and acquaintances came in and went out again. For once in her life, Mary Barber was oblivious of the home wash, and her promise to return for it. She took her bonnet off, borrowed a cap of her poor sister's, and remained.

William Pickering was taken to the Guildhall for examination before the magistrates, late in the afternoon. His brother attended it, and—very much to her own surprise—so did Mary Barber. The accusation and the facts had resolved themselves into something tangible; the prisoner was able to understand the grounds they had against him; and the solicitor, whom he called to his assistance, drove up in a gig to Mrs. Pickering's, and took possession of Mary Barber.

"What's the good of whirling me off to the Guildhall?" she asked resentfully, three times over, as he drove back into Worcester. "I don't know anything about it; I never was inside that office of the Pickering's in all my life."

"You'll see," said the lawyer, with a smile.

One thing was satisfactory—that old Mr. Stone had come to life again. The blow, though a very hard one, had stunned but not killed him; he was, in fact, not injured beyond a probability of recovery. He had no knowledge of his assailant: whoever had come up behind him, as he sat bending over his desk, had struck him down unawares.

The Guildhall was crowded: a case exciting so much interest had rarely occurred in Worcester. Independently of the prisoner's station in life, his good looks, youth and popularity, there were the attendant circumstances—the marriage of his brother in the morning, the death of Mrs. Pickering. Of the last sad fact they did not tell him. "Let him get his examination over, poor fellow!" said they in kindness of heart. And he stood before the court, upright, frank, unfettered by sorrow. "He must have done it in a moment of passion," said his friends and the public; for the facts seemed too clearly against him to admit of doubt—the long-continued ill-feeling known to exist between him and the old clerk, who had persistently taken his brother Richard's part; the quarrelling of the morning, as heard by Dance, which the prisoner did not deny; and the absence of any one else in the office. Richard Pickering, his heart beating with a horrible conviction that none else could have been guilty, was not one to publicly denounce his brother. He affected to assume his innocence, and stood by him to afford him all the countenance in his power.

The facts were given—those gathered in the first moment of discovery, and others since. Dance spoke of the quarrelling between the clerk and his young master. Corney proved his visit, and that upon its termination he left Mr. Stone and William Pickering alone, and he could see that they were not on friendly terms. This was about twenty minutes past ten. Corney added, in answer to a question, that he had heard nothing of William Pickering's intention to depart home; on the contrary, he said he should be at the office all day. After that——

Yes, but then he had not opened his mother's note, interrupted the prisoner, who, up to this point, acknowledged all that was said to be correct. But the instant he read the note he started home, knowing how little time there was to lose; and

he told old Stone that he need not be vexed on Richard's account any longer, for after all he was going to be his best man. He knew no more.

Corney resumed : A little before eleven he returned to the office to say he would take the hops at the price offered, and was horrified to find old Mr. Stone on the ground, as he thought, dead. He raised an alarm, and went himself in search of Dance, whom he found in the warehouse. Some one else ran for a constable, others for a surgeon. Of course the conclusion arrived at was that Mr. William Pickering had done the deed.

The bench appeared to be arriving at the same conclusion.

"Not so fast, gentlemen," said William Pickering's lawyer ; and he put forth another witness.

It was Mr. Kilpin, the hop-merchant, and well known in the town. He deposed that he had called in at the Messrs. Pickering's office that morning between half-past ten and eleven. Mr. Stone was alone, writing at his desk. He remained talking to him three or four minutes, and left at a quarter to eleven. He was enabled to state the time positively from the fact, that-----

"Why, then, it could not have been William Pickering ; he was at home at that very time," cried Mary Barber.

The bench silenced her ; but she saw now why she had been brought to the Guildhall.

Mr. Kilpin took up the thread of his sentence as if no interruption had occurred.

"From the fact that, as I passed St. Nicholas Church, it chimed the three-quarters past ten. I was on my way to catch the Pershore coach, for I was going by it as far as Whittington, and it was at that moment turning the corner of Broad Street. I had to run for it, and the coachman pulled up opposite the Old Bank. When I got back from Whittington this afternoon," added the witness, "I accidentally met Mr. William Pickering's lawyer, and learnt what had occurred."

Next came the evidence of Mary Barber, that William Pickering was in his mother's house at three-quarters past ten. Of course there could be no further doubt of his innocence after this. Meanwhile the prisoner had been pencilling a few lines, and they were passed over to his brother. Something in

the demeanour of one of the witnesses as he gave his evidence had forcibly struck him.

"I have an idea that the guilty man is Dance. Take care that he does not escape. If he has done this, he may also have pilfered your petty cash. Try and get it all cleared up, for the mother's peace."

"For the mother's peace!" echoed Richard, with an aching heart. "Poor William little dreams of the blow in store for him."

He, Richard Pickering, did not dream; he acted. Giving a hint to the officer to look after Dance, he pressed up to his brother, then being released from custody.

"William," he whispered, "tell me the truth in this solemn moment—more sadly solemn than you are as yet cognizant of—have you really never touched that missing money? As I lay awake last night thinking about it, I began to fancy I might have been mistaken all through. If so——"

"If so, we shall be the good friends we used to be," heartily interrupted William, as he clasped his brother's hand. "On my sacred word, I never touched it; I could not do so; and you must have been prejudiced to fancy it. I'll lay any money Dance will turn out to have been the black sheep. Both looks and tones were false as he gave his evidence."

And William Pickering was right. Dance was so effectually "looked after" that night, that some ugly facts came out, and he was quietly taken into custody. True enough, the black sheep had been no one else. He had skilfully pilfered the petty sums; had struck down Mr. Stone as he sat at his desk, merely to take a couple of sovereigns he saw lying in it. The old gentleman recovered, and gave evidence on the trial at the following March Assizes, and Richard and William Pickering from henceforth were more closely knit together than they had ever been.

But the singular circumstances attending the death of Mrs. Pickering—her apparition (for could it be anything less?) to Mary Barber—became public property. People talked of it with timid glances and hushed voices; and for a long

time neither girl nor woman would pass through the two fields alone.

And that is the ending. If I have been unduly minute in regard to details, I only reiterate the minuteness given at the time by Mary Barber. She fully believed that the spirit of her sister came to lead her to the house—where otherwise she would not have gone—there to meet William Pickering, and so become the means of establishing his innocence : and would believe so to her dying day.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE SHADOW.

It was lovely autumn weather. The Beechhurst Dene woods were glowing with their rich tints in the October sunshine ; the sky was blue and cloudless as in the fairest day of summer.

Turning out at the lodge-gates of Beechhurst Dene, was a species of mail-phaeton ; a high yellow vehicle, all the fashion of the period. The horses were iron-grey, fine, valuable animals ; high steppers, but steady withal, and much like their owner, Sir Dene Clanwaring. Sir Dene sat in the carriage to-day by the side of his son Geoffry, who was driving. Sweeping out of the avenue and across the highway, Geoffry turned the horses' heads down a road that looked newly made.

It was so. Sir Dene had carried out his project—some deemed it his folly—and lost no time in completing what he had set his mind upon—a near way to the village of Hurst Leet. It was a broad white road ; leading from Sir Dene's gates downwards, and winding round into the middle of the hamlet. Hurst Leet was proud of it. Sir Dene was proud of it. It had cost Sir Dene more money than he had believed possible ; a costly toy, he was apt to whisper in the privacy of his own heart ; nevertheless he could afford it, and complacently said that the convenience of the road would well repay its outlay. Some three weeks had elapsed since it was finished ; and Sir Dene had driven through it almost every day.

All trace of the widow Barber's cottage was gone. That

estimable but in the opinion of Mr. Drew—cross-grained old lady had been forced out of her lifelong home. There had been a scene at her departure. Lady-Day—the period by which she was ordered to be gone—came and passed; and Mrs. Barber had removed neither herself nor her chattels. Another day's grace was given her, together with a peremptory command: but the widow did not stir. She had lived in the old place for six-and-seventy years, she pleaded, and could not, in the nature of things, last much longer—oh if they would only let her remain in it for that short interval! Earnestly did she pray for this boon, as though she were praying for life. Sir Dene was made acquainted with this contumacious behaviour and wrathfully issued the edict for her ejection. Geoffry Clanwaring, ever good-hearted, alone put in a protest, asking his father to grant the poor woman's prayer, seconding her plea that it could not be for long. But Sir Dene sharply told his son not to be foolish—the new road could not wait *her* pleasure. So, on the following morning, sundry men presented themselves at the widow Barber's, quietly but forcibly put her goods outside the door, and turned her cow and pig and chickens into the road. She had to follow them: and went meekly forth, weeping and wringing her hands. Mary Barber hired a couple of rooms for her mother and some of her furniture; and the cow and pig and fowls were sold to the highest bidder on the spot. But the fact created a great deal of scandal in the neighbourhood, and Sir Dene received a good deal of censure. Sir Dene excused himself by saying that the extreme measure of ejecting her in that summary manner belonged to his bailiff, Drew. But he could not escape from the fact that he had given his edict for her removal: and Jonathan Drew might have reasonably retorted on the grumblers with the question—How was he to get the old woman out when she refused to go?

As though tormented by the fear that she might be re-appearing like the slippers in Eastern story—the men lost not a moment in commencing the work of destruction. A few bricks were out of the walls before the weeping woman was out of sight. A rumour went abroad of what was going on, and numbers of gazers came flocking up. They remained to



watch, and talked freely. The doors were off then, the windows out. What with the work of dismantling, the goods lying about outside, the straying cow and pig, and the increasing spectators, such a scene of excitement and confusion had never before been witnessed by the rural population. It remained on their memories as an epoch of local history, to be talked of at convivial meetings and related by father to son: Sir Dene Clanwaring's ejection of the poor old widow Barber, when close upon her eightieth year.

Hands were quick. On the following day the rubbish of bricks and mortar was ready to be carted away: and on the subsequent morning the new road was begun at both ends: at the upper end opposite the gates of Beechhurst Dene; at the lower end at Hurst Leet. Sir Dene was all impatience for the road to be completed, and many hands made light work. Never a thought cast he to the unhappy woman who had been rudely thrust out from her shell, and whose heart was breaking. Sir Dene was not by nature a hard or harsh man; but he had certainly acted both hardly and harshly in this matter.

*"So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and beheld the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter."*

If ever there was a signal exemplification of the truthful teaching of one, to whom God had given more than earthly wisdom, it surely existed in this instance.

And now, behold the road completed—smooth, compact, level. See it this early morning, as Sir Dene drives down it. The hill as at this end, commencing at the very outset; a long hill, but gentle: its descent not sufficient to cause good horses to slacken speed, either going up or coming down. No trace is to be seen of the widow's cottage, its garden, pig-sty, or cow-shed; it is as though they had never existed: the new road runs right through the site. As to the meadow where her cow was wont to graze, Sir Dene has ploughed it up, fencing it in from the road. On the other side, the pathway still remains; the high bank above it remains; and the branches of the towering elms cast their shadows on the road in the sunlight, just as the same shadows had once been cast on the cottage.

A fine road : and just now the pride of Sir Dene Clanwaring's heart. It had not been Sir Dene's intention to bestow upon it any special name : he had not thought about it ; but the workmen when making it, began to speak of it familiarly amongst themselves as "The Hollow"—probably because they had a portion of it to hollow out. This was taken up by Hurst Leet, and converted into "Dene's Hollow." The name grew at length into "Dene Hollow," and Dene Hollow it remained.

Away they bowled, Sir Dene and his son. Geoffry, an experienced driver, had the reins well in hand. The calm, lovely autumn day was delicious and invigorating.

"Who's that, Geoffry?" asked Sir Dene, as a tall woman, her face almost hidden under its large quilted bonnet of faded green silk, passed on the path, and curtsied to Sir Dene.

"It is Mary Barber, sir." And Geoffry silently wondered that the woman upon whose mother had been committed that act of injustice should continue to render homage to Sir Dene. Manners in those days were widely different from what they are in these : reverence for the great was an institution.

"Oh, ay ; servant at Farmer Owen's, I believe," remarked Sir Dene, airily : for indeed the episode of the ejection, together with Mary Barber's pleading visit, had nearly passed out of his mind, or at least had lost its sting. "I didn't know her in that poke-bonnet. How is that daughter of Owen's, Geoffry—she who married Old Arde's relative. Any better? You go there sometimes, don't you?"

"To George Arde's? Now and then, sir, when I am in Worcester. Mrs. Arde is ill still."

"Talking of Owen, he wants his barn—— Take care, Geoff."

Without the slightest warning, without apparent cause, both horses had started violently, as though in some great terror, and swerved across the road. It was in the very spot where the cottage had been. Geoffry Clanwaring did all that a practised driver could do ; but it was as nothing. The frightened animals bounded on the bank and off again, upsetting the phaeton. There they stood, plunging and kicking.

Geoffry was on his legs in an instant ; uninjured, except for a bruise on the right shoulder and elbow—which he did not

feel until later. Some men, who happened to be passing on the upper road by the gates of Beechhurst Dene, came running down. The traces were cut, one of the shivering horses fell, and lay still ; the other they soothed to quietness.

This gave them time to look into the condition of Sir Dene. He had been thrown over Geoffry's head, and was, of course, much shaken. Moreover, he could not get up without assistance. There was some damage to one of his ankles. A severe sprain, they found ; not a fracture.

"It might have been worse," remarked Sir Dene. "What in the world frightened the horses, Geoffry?"

"I don't know, sir," was Geoffry's puzzled answer. "There was nothing whatever to startle them."

"I am sure I saw nothing."

"There was absolutely nothing. Not a creature was near us, human or animal. How shall we get you home, sir?"

"Oh, I can manage to limp, with your arm on one side, and somebody else's on the other," returned Sir Dene. "I hope the horses are all right. It might have been worse for us all, Geoff."

"Indeed it might, father."

Yes, it might have been worse. Nevertheless one of the horses, in plunging, had fatally injured itself, and had to be shot. Cole, the farrier, had a day or two's hope over it, but it proved futile. Sir Dene was terribly put out, and told Cole he would almost as soon have been shot himself. The affair created nearly as much stir and talk in Hurst Leet as the widow Barber's ejection had done.

Two or three evenings after this, Mary Barber set out to see her mother, carrying a small jug of a delectable compound called buttered-ale, which Mrs. Owen had caused to be made. It was a cordial thought much of in those days, and often sent by the wealthy to the aged or sick. Mrs. Barber had found refuge with John Pound and his wife, renting their two upper rooms. The cottage was situated on the upper road, near Arde Hall ; Pound being Squire Arde's waggoner. The old lady was seated on the rug before the fire ; her head reclining on a chair.

"Why, mother, you are low in the world !" was Mary's salutation. "What are you down there for?"

Mrs. Barber got up without answering, and took her seat in the chair. "It's a bit shivery to-night, child," she said. And a spectator might have smiled at tall, hard, middle-aged Mary being addressed as "child."

"Shivery Why, it's quite warm, mother."

Could this poor shrunken creature be the once plump, well-conditioned woman who had lived in that disputed cottage? Was it possible that only a few months had made so great a change in her? Alas! yes. And the marvel was that she had lasted as long as this.

She was literally a skeleton. The face had lost its roundness and fresh colour, the eyes were sunken, and dim with a sadness that might be felt. No special malady had apparently caused the change; her health, excepting a failing appetite, had not appeared to suffer. But grief when hopeless and excessive, induces decay more rapidly in the aged than disease. Old Hester Barber's heart was broken.

"I've not been able to run down this last two days, mother," said Mary, looking rather keenly at the worn face in the fire-light, for she thought it more changed than ever. She fancied, moreover, that it wore a greyish tinge, which she had never observed before; and she did not much like to see it now. "The missus has sent you some buttered-ale; it will do you good."

"The missus is over-kind, Mary; but I don't feel as if I could touch it, child. I don't feel to want anything."

"That's all nonsense, mother. I'll light the candle."

As the light fell on her mother's face, Mary Barber scanned it well. Yes, it was certainly grey to-night, with a peculiar greyness. She put the buttered-ale into a basin, and reached a spoon.

"Now, mother, take it before it's quite cold. Never mind about not wanting it: it'll cheer you up and warm you, whether you want it or not."

Holding the basin so that it rested on her knee, the dying woman—for she was dying slowly—sipped a few spoonfuls of the ale. Mary sat opposite, chatting.

"Did ye hear of the accident to Sir Dene Clanwaring, mother?"

"Ay, I heard on't. Pound came upstairs here on purpose to tell me."

It's cost a sight o' money mending the carriage, Cole's son says. And they've had to shoot the best horse."

Mrs. Barber shook her head in solemn silence.

"I had passed 'em not a minute before, coming up from Hurst Leet, where I had been on an errand," continued Mary. "Very fine and grand it looked, that turn-out; you might have taken a lease of the horses. Before I had well got into the upper road by the gates, there was a startling noise down there, and I looked back. Mother, you might have floored me with a word when I saw the carriage overturned, the two gentlemen lying on the ground, and the cattle plunging."

"Ay, ay," murmured Mrs. Barber.

"I didn't believe my eyes. They had been going along as steady as old time, and they don't know what the horses started at. Young Mr. Clanwaring was at our house yesterday, and I heard him tell the master that it would always puzzle him."

"It was the Shadow," remarked the old woman, almost whispering. "I'd lay my life, 'twas the Shadow on the road."

"The what?" cried Mary.

"The Shadow."

Mary Barber supposed this must allude to the shadows cast by the trees. To any one but her mother she would have met the assertion with unsparing ridicule.

"'Twas not likely to have been *that*, mother. The trees are 'always there; and their shadows too, when the sun's going down."

"I said the Shadow, Mary; not the shadows cast by the trees."

"What Shadow?"

"The one I saw on the road."

Mary Barber believed the old mind was wandering, and stared for a minute without speaking.

"Take your buttered-ale, mother."

Instead of that, Mrs. Barber stretched out her withered arm and put the basin down on the table.

"There's a shadow on that road, child. The poor dumb animals saw it, and were frightened at it. They see sometimes

what man can't see. Maybe, it'll come now and again, to lie on the Hollow."

Mary Barber was sufficiently superstitious herself, and had seen at least one ghost, as her friends knew; but she was wholly at fault now. Instead of debating the point, she stared in silence at the grey face.

"It's a shadow to frighten the best of horses, an' they get to see it, Mary. It frightened me."

"Be you wandering, mother?" demanded Mary Barber, in rather a hard tone.

"Wandering! What put that into your head, child?"

"What else is it? Talking in this way about shadows?"

"How long is it since this new road was opened?" rejoined Mrs. Barber—and certainly, in all but the subject, her tones were quite as rational as usual. "What do they call it again—Dene Hollow?"

"Ay. It's more than three weeks now."

"Three weeks on Tuesday last. John Pound came upstairs the evening before; Monday; and said the workmen were clearing off their tools, and the road would be open to the parish on the morrow. When the morrow came, I thought I'd put on my old red cloak and go out and take a look at it. 'Twas a fine, sunshiny day, warm for September. I reached the place, and leaned my arms on the fence opposite the Dene gates, and looked at it. A fine smooth road, almost fine enough to break an old woman's heart for. I didn't know the place again. Not a brick was left o' the poor homestead; not as much as a stone to mark where it had been. 'Twas all swept clean away; the walls, and the yellow jessamine that used to climb on 'em."

"It's said they've got that yellow jessamine rooted now at Beechhurst Dene," interrupted Mary Barber. "'Twas always rare and flourishing."

"But while my eyes looked this way and that," pursued Mrs. Barber, "trying to tell whether the home had stood an inch nearer or farther away, they grew to see that a shadow was lying on the road, just where the house had been. These eyes saw it, child. And they'd never seen anything like it before."



"Was it the shape of the house?" questioned Mary—as much in mockery as in earnestness.

"It wasn't any shape at all. It was just as though a *darkness* lay on that part o' the hollow; or as if you were looking at it through smoked glass. Mary, I'll tell you what it put me in mind of—the Valley of the Shadow of Death."

"Mother!"

"It did."

"I don't think it's right to say that."

"I wouldn't be the one to say anything wrong; but truth's truth; and the thought came into my mind as I stood there."

"What was it like?" questioned Mary Barber, in somewhat more reverent tones.

"It was just a dark shadow, nothing else. But there was nothing to cast it there, and it made me tremble all over. I've trembled since when I think of it. Randy Black came by at the moment, and I asked him to look there has been a good deal o' talk against Black in the place, but the man has always showed himself civil to me. He stopped and put his arms on the rail, and looked to where I pointed; but he could not see it. He couldn't see it. He said it was as fine and bright all down the new road, every inch on't, as it was elsewhere. But the Shadow was there all the same. You couldn't tell where it began or where it ended: just that bit o' the road—ten or twenty yards, maybe—lay in darkness."

To hear Mrs. Barber relating this, her tones subdued, her dim eyes gazing into the fire as though she could see the Shadow there, her whole manner and bearing solemnly earnest, brought a curious sensation to Mary.

"I will take a look myself the next time I pass by, mother."

Mrs. Barber shook her head. "You mightn't see anything. I don't think you will. I went out again the next day, and couldn't see it. Brooding over it here since, it has come to me to think that perhaps no other human eye, save mine, ever will see it. Black couldn't. But the Shadow was there all the time he looked: never a doubt of that."

"It sounds curious," was Mary Barber's answer.

"Aye. But it's true. I never was surer of anything in this

world. Well, I'd almost forgot it, Mary ; I thought it was just a thing unaccountable, that had come and passed. But when John Pound brought news o' the upset in that same spot, saying it was quite a mystery what had startled the horses, for there was nobody nigh and nothing to cause it, it flashed over me that they must have seen the same Shadow that I saw—and I don't know how I felt, so struck and dumfounded was I. It's to be hoped it'll never come there again. Sir Dene turned me out," added the old woman, after a pause, "but I don't wish him ill. I'd do him any good that lay in my power."

"Well, mother, *I* feel sore at him ; I can tell you that."

"Ay, so did I, at first. But the Lord has been good and shown me a little of His light. When Heaven's opening to us, Mary, we are glad to forgive those that have injured us. I didn't think enough o' these things till I came here—mercy and charity, and forgiveness to others and my own sins and mistakes. I never might have thought of 'em. And so, perhaps it has all happened for the best. One must get one's heart broken, as mine's been, before one can be at full love and peace with all the world, friends and enemies alike."

Mary Barber did not quite know what to make of her mother ; she had never seen her like this. All Mrs. Barber had been noted for since she lost her home, was silent abstraction. She would answer questions put to her, but rarely spoke of her own accord.

"I wish you'd finish your ale, mother."

Mrs. Barber took a sip or two, and let the spoon fall again.

"I can't, Mary. The heart goes against it ; and something seems wrong with my throat. Leave it : maybe I'll try it later."

"Shall I help you to bed, mother?"

"No. 'Tisn't time, child."

"I must be going soon. Is there anything else I can do?"

"You may read just a few verses o' the Bible, if you like. My sight's got good for nothing."

More and more amazed, for Mary had never heard such a request from her mother on a week-day, she got up to reach the Bible—one that had been in use on Sundays as long as she

could remember. But she suddenly discovered that she had not brought her spectacles with her—and upon looking for her mother's could not find them. Mrs. Barber seemed disappointed.

"Oh, well, never mind. But it wouldn't have taken you five minutes, Mary."

"It's not the time, mother; it is that I can't see. Where's the large Bible—father's? I could see that print."

It was on the top shelf of the press near the bed, and Mary had to stand on a stool to reach it down. A large Bible covered with green baize, that had been Thomas Barber's; one they never used.

She dusted it, sat down, and read the chapter asked for—the 14th of St. John. Mrs Barber listened attentively.

"Ay, ay," she murmured when it was over, "many mansions *there*. There'll be no sorrow up there, child, and no Shadow."

"I wonder what's inside this cover?" cried Mary, who, in passing her hand over the green baize, in a moment's reverie, found that something lay between it and the book.

"There's nothing there."

"There is, mother. It feels like a letter. May I look?"

"You can look. I know there's nothing."

Cutting the thread she removed the covering, and found a piece of folded brown paper, containing two or three documents. Had Mary Barber's pulses been given to fluttering, they had certainly fluttered then—for a prevision told her what was coming. Two of them were old receipts for rent; the other was the missing document, given by Mr. Honeythorn.

But the time had gone by for Mrs. Barber to be moved about anything in this world. She just looked round from the fire, but did not examine the document.

"I remember now: I did put it there. I never thought o' the Bible when we were looking for it. Every other place but that. You'll show it to Sir Dene, Mary, that he may see what I said was true."

"Yes, I'll show it to Sir Dene—and to others also," was the emphatic answer.

Mary Barber wished her mother good-night, again urging

the potion upon her, and departed, the paper safely stowed away in her pocket. She stepped into Mrs. Pound's kitchen to say a word.

"You'll give a look upstairs to mother before you go to bed, Matty. She seems queer to-night."

"How—queer?" asked Mrs. Pound, who sat mending her husband's Sunday coat.

"Well, I hardly know. She don't seem as she always does. She won't take the buttered-ale I brought her."

Mrs. Pound thought the state must be serious indeed to refuse *that*. "I'll be sure and go up," said she.

"And if she should be worse in the morning, send little Jack to the farm to let me know, please. Our wash is not got up yet, and we are going to brew to-morrow, so I can't possibly get out before night—unless it's for something particular. If she should become ill, we must have Mr. Priar to her. Good-night, Matty."

Mrs. Pound responded to the salutation, and Mary Barber went home. The document in her pocket felt as good as though it had been a hundred-pound note there.

"My poor mother always said she hoped the paper would come to light before she died. Sir Dene will see whether she was telling lies now! And Jonathan Drew will see—but *he's* not worth a thought."

The following morning Mary Barber was toasting some bacon in the kitchen for her master's breakfast, when she was surprised by the appearance of John Pound. Not little Jack, but John himself. He came to bring her bad news, which he got out awkwardly. Mrs. Barber was dead.

Mrs. Pound had seen her comfortably to bed the night before. Upon going into the room in the morning, they found her dead. She had died quietly in her sleep.

"The Squire told me to come up," cried Pound to the dismayed Mary Barber. "He was passing, and heard what 'twas, and said, 'Go up at once, never mind t' work for a bit.' Matty says there baint no call to fret too much; she must ha' gone off wi'out pain as quank as a lamb."

Ay. The broken heart was at rest,

## CHAPTER VI.

## IN ST. PETER'S CHURCH.

IN a small but pretty house of St. Peter's parish in the suburbs of Worcester, four people sat in the twilight of a November afternoon. George Arde and his wife, Maria Owen, and Geoffry Clanwaring.

George Arde, a man of middle height, with dark eyes and hair, and a pale, honest, but plain face, somewhat stern in its character, was about thirty. He had small, independent means, derived from his hop-yards. When it was a good hop year, George Arde was flourishing ; when the hops failed, he had to look to his shillings as well as his pounds. Taking one year with another, his income averaged perhaps two hundred pounds ; no great wealth ; and it may appear singular that Farmer Owen should have regretted his daughter's marriage, on the plea that it exalted her above her station. But his view was correct ; for George Arde, a gentleman by birth, and well connected, moved in a sphere above that of the farmer ; one to which the latter would not have been admitted. At the time of the marriage Mr. Owen had protested against it—yielding at last only a reluctant consent ; but George Arde, a willing captive to Mary Owen's beauty, would not hear of giving her up. As to the remote contingency that he might succeed to Squire Arde's wealth, none looked on it as more of a chimera than George himself. He and the Squire were not very nearly related ; George had never received the smallest favour from him, never the slightest intimation that he might inherit as much as a mourning ring ; and he certainly did not anticipate it. The Squire had other relatives, as near—or, rather, as distant—as he ; but none expected to be remembered in the will of the eccentric old man. As to George Arde's own prospects, he intended to put by a little money every good hop year, buy more yards, and so grow rich. We all have schemes for making ourselves wealthy in the course of time.

Mrs. Arde sat by the fire, a baby of some four months old sleeping in her arms. It was very precious to the mother,

this little thing ; and they had given it her own name, Mary. Fragile, delicate, attenuated, but exquisitely beautiful, was Mrs. Arde. There seemed to be no strength or vitality in her. A flush would appear on her cheeks towards the close of the afternoon ; but at other times her face was pale as alabaster : the blue veins under the clear skin easily traced. George Arde feared the paleness less than the flush : for the latter looked suspiciously like hectic. There were moments when a horrible prevision came over him that he should lose her : but he strove to drive the fear away, even from his own heart, and never spoke of it. Maria Owen had been staying with her sister for several weeks now. Mr. and Mrs. Owen willingly spared her, for they also had secret fears about Mary's health. But now that Mrs. Arde seemed to be growing somewhat stronger, Maria was to go home : and it had been settled that her father should take her back with him when he came in to market on the following Saturday.

And Maria's sojourn in the house accounted for the frequent presence of Geoffry Clanwaring. Hardly a day passed but upon some pretext or other Mr. Geoffry paid a visit to Worcester. Sir Dene, utterly unsuspecting, told him he was growing restlessly fond of riding. Not that Geoffry always rode in ; he often walked. Just now Sir Dene, who had recovered from his sprain, was staying in London, and Geoffry was altogether his own master in regard to his movements. He had walked in this afternoon, and now had to walk back again. Therefore he intended to leave earlier than usual ; for he had business at home that night with Jonathan Drew.

"And you really cannot stay for tea?" asked Mrs. Arde, as he shook hands with her.

"Not this evening, thank you. I wish I could. Good-night, Arde."

"Good-night, Geoffry."

"I wish you would come as far as the gate with me, Maria. I have something to say to you."

Geoffry Clanwaring turned to ask this as he was leaving the room. Maria blushed painfully, and hesitated—hesitated because of the presence of the others. But Geoffry held open



the door, waiting for her, and she timidly followed him. That Mr. and Mrs. Arde were tacitly aware of the state of affairs between Geoffry and Maria—namely, that he was paying his addresses to her, as the phrase ran—could only be a matter of course; otherwise they had possessed neither sense nor perception. They did not interfere. George Arde felt that all interference would be useless, for he remembered his own case; and it really was no concern of his, that he should make or mar it. Mrs. Arde trembled a little, seeing insurmountable difficulties before them; and once she spoke one word of warning to her sister. “Papa can never give his consent, Maria. It would put him all wrong with Sir Dene.” Maria answered nothing; but the sadness that overspread her face proved to Mary Arde how perfectly she understood the hopelessness of the future: and that Mr. Owen’s consent was a thing never to be looked for. And so, Mr. and Mrs. Arde had gone on, tacitly sanctioning the state of matters, inasmuch as that they did not put a stop to Geoffry’s visits. He had found many a moment for seeing Maria alone; for George Arde would be out and about, and the delicate young mother had often to remain in her chamber. But this was the first time Geoffry had gone so far as to ask Maria to go out of the room with him.

“George,” whispered his wife, as the room door closed, “I feel that we are incurring a great responsibility in suffering this. Should it ever be discovered at home, papa will say so.”

“How is it to be helped?” returned George Arde. “*We* can do nothing, either way. It is not to be expected, Mary, that I should go off to her father, or to his father, and betray them.”

“Well—no. Of course not. At any rate, it will be over on Saturday,” added Mrs. Arde, with a sigh of relief. “The responsibility, I mean. Maria returns home then, and I shall be glad of it; much as I regret to lose her.”

Meanwhile Maria, a light shawl thrown over her shoulders, that she had caught up in passing out, was pacing down the path on Geoffry’s arm. George Arde could see them through the window in the twilight. It was some such a night as the

one already mentioned, when the two men with their burden had gone stealing up Harebell Lane ; moonlight, but boisterous. A cold November evening.

"Everything is arranged, Maria," began Geoffry. "I saw the clergyman this afternoon, and I have the license. Nine o'clock, mind. You will find me at the church waiting for you."

For Geoffry Clanwaring had succeeded in obtaining Maria Owen's consent to marrying him. They meant to take French leave : get married quietly, and tell the world afterwards. Such weddings were rather common in those days ; and were regarded with less reprehension than in these. To do Maria justice, she had at first steadily refused : but Geoffry had eloquently pointed out that there was no middle course open to them ; nothing between that and separation. And to separate was beyond the philosophy of either.

"I cannot possibly see how I shall get away in my white dress," she answered. "The season is now too far advanced to wear white in a morning. If they saw me, they might suspect something."

"Put on a big shawl or cloak," suggested Geoffry. "Or come in an ordinary dress : what does it matter?"

At the foot of the little garden a sheltered walk ran behind the hedge, secure from observation. Geoffry turned into it.

"I want to try the ring on, love."

He had bought it that afternoon at the silversmith's. The same from whom the gold and silver plate had been stolen : which robbery, as to its perpetrators, had never been discovered, in spite of the cunning of the Bow Street runners. Mr. Geoffry found he had guessed the size well ; the friendly night hid the blushes on Maria's sweet face, as he told her so.

"Oh, but, Geoffry, I scarcely dare to think of it!" she said imploringly. "I tremble for the consequences. And besides, it is *not* a right thing for us to do."

"It is quite right, my love, and can injure no one. When once my father knows you, and finds that we are happy, he will forgive all. And you are aware that Mr. Owen would give you to me himself, so far as I alone am concerned."

"I have never disobeyed my father and mother before," she said, bursting into tears.

Geoffry Clanwaring kissed the tears away. The gentle, lovely face, very sad then, lay passively against him, and he took kiss after kiss from it, as he whisperingly strove to reassure her with all the eloquence that love is master of. And thus they parted—for the last time before their wedding-day.

The church of St. Peter's was open in the morning. A damp old church in the region of Frog Lane, that you stepped down into as into a vault. The clergyman was in the vestry; the clerk fidgeted about the pews. Geoffry Clanwaring, in bridegroom's attire, stood looking anxiously from the door.

A breathless, agitated girl came in; a most lovely, dimpled, timid girl, who took off her red gipsy cloak as she entered, which had served to partially cover her. Her wedding-dress was of white India muslin—the material had been a present years ago from her god-mother—and a straw hat trimmed with a wreath of pale blush-roses.

"God bless you, my darling!" cried Geoffry, coming forward to meet her. "It is seven minutes past nine, and I was upon thorns."

"I was so afraid," she whispered. "I did not dare come out of my room lest any one should meet me on the stairs."

"I shall want you to give away this young lady," said Geoffry to the clerk, slipping a substantial fee into that functionary's hand.

"At your pleasure, sir."

The clergyman came out in his surplice, and took his place. It has been remarked that such weddings were tolerably common then; and the clergyman made no fuss about this one. He saw that the license was in order, asked a question or two, and proceeded with his work.

Rarely has a handsomer couple knelt before the altar, never one more attractive. He, tall and strong, with his fair Saxon beauty, his kindly blue eyes, his golden hair; she in her gentle, blushing loveliness. The clergyman pronounced them man and wife, and gave the bridegroom, at his own request, a certificate.

The weather had culminated in a downfall of rain when

they went out again. It had been a dull, grey morning, and now the rain had commenced. Maria gathered up her white muslin under her cloak, and tripped along on Geoffry's arm. Thanks to the umbrella—which he had had the precaution to bring from home—and the rainy streets, they reached Mr. Arde's without observation.

In consequence of Mrs. Arde's delicate state, and perhaps also of the exactions of the baby, breakfast had recently been taken very late, more especially when she attempted to come down to it—as she had done this morning. The tea was only being made; and Maria's escapade had not been discovered: it was supposed she had not yet left her chamber. Geoffry went in first, in his light overcoat.

"Why, Geoffry!" exclaimed George Arde, with intense surprise. "You are in town early!"

Geoffry threw back his coat, and they saw that his costume was a gala one. Quite at the first moment, no suspicion was aroused. George Arde, as he stared, thought there might be some ceremonious breakfast in the town, that Geoffry had come in for.

"Is anything going on in Worcester to-day, Geoffry?"

"Not that I know of. I have been getting married."

He turned to the door, and brought Maria in, scarlet cloak and all. Mr. Arde looked from one to the other; his wife sank into a chair bewildered.

"Oh, Maria!" she gasped.

Maria flew to her, and hid her face on her bosom in a passion of hysterical tears. They could not soothe her: emotion, hitherto suppressed, had its way now.

"Oh, Mary! forgive me!" came the sobbing cry.

Geoffry tenderly took off the hat and cloak, and stroked the hand with its new wedding-ring fondly within his own. Mrs. Arde was pale as death.

"You—are—surely—not really married!" she exclaimed.

"Here's the certificate," said Geoffry, handing it to Mr. Arde. "It's all in form. We were married at your parish church—St. Peter's."

"Well, you are a clever fellow!"—cried Mr. Arde, half admiringly, half angrily.

"And my father and mother!—what a blow it will be to them!" bewailed Mrs. Arde, weeping with Maria.

"I hope not," answered Geoffry. "They both like me."

"Who is to break it to them?"

"I, of course. I shall go over there to-day or to-morrow for the purpose. You won't refuse to give us some breakfast, Arde?"

Mr. Arde, recovering a little from his annoyance—for he had felt at first both dismayed and angry—told him that as much breakfast was at their service as they liked to take. Just as he had been hitherto neutral in the matter, so he resolved, after taking a moment's counsel with himself, to remain so. The marriage had certainly been no fault of his: none could be more surprised at it than he; and therefore no blame could attach to him. He did not see why he should either espouse their cause, or turn against them: and he determined to do neither.

"It is entirely your own concern, Geoffry; I shall not make it mine. I am sorry that you have taken this step—and there's sure to be a row over it: but I don't see that *I* am called upon to resent it. And so—here's good luck to you both."

"Thank you heartily," replied Geoffry: whilst Maria wept in silence.

"But do not think I approve of what you have done—don't run away with that idea to tell your friends," resumed George Arde. "What are your plans?"

"Plans?" returned Geoffry.

"Ay. Where are you going to take Maria? Up to the moon?"

"Up to Malvern. I have engaged lodgings there for the present."

"Oh, I thought you might be going to take her to Beech-hurst Dene," cried Mr. Arde, rather satirically.

"I must wait for that."

But before sitting down to breakfast, Maria escaped to her chamber, unseen by either of the servants, removed the tell-tale attire, and assumed her ordinary dress.

Surprises that day seemed to be the lot of Mr. and Mrs. Arde. The morning was wearing on, nearing the time that Geoffry intended to take his bride away—driving her in his

open gig to avert any suspicion a close carriage might have given rise to—when Squire Arde called. The same little, stooping old man that you have already seen; in the same pepper-and-salt suit with the silver knee and shoe buckles; the same fluffy great-coat falling from his narrow shoulders. He had never yet honoured them with a call: hence the surprise: and Mrs. Arde blushed as she rose timidly to receive him. As to Maria, she felt ready to sink into the earth: in the first confused moment a wild fancy coming over her that her father knew all about the morning's work, and Squire Arde had arrived as a herald of war.

"What, are *you* here!" cried he, staring at Geoffry.

"I came into Worcester this morning, Squire," was the carelessly given answer.

"Oh," returned the Squire, glancing at Maria, as though he had some suspicion that she might be the attraction. "When d'y'e expect Sir Dene home from Lunnon?"

"In a week or two, I suppose; it's uncertain," answered Geoffry.

Squire Arde's visit this morning was not dictated by friendship or courtesy; he had only come to inquire after the character of a man who had been employed upon George Arde's hop-grounds.

"I don't know much about him, sir," was George's answer. "He is steady enough, I think. Jonathan Drew could tell you more about him than I can."

"Ah, I dare say," was the old man's remark. "But Drew might not speak the truth, you know."

"Not speak the truth!" interposed Geoffry Clanwaring. "Drew would surely do that, Squire. Though uncouth in manner, he is truthful."

"When he finds it convenient to be so," returned the Squire, with composure. "He did not speak the truth for Tom Barber's widow."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"In the matter of that lost agreement. Drew knew it was given to her well enough, though it suited his purpose to forget it."

"If I thought Drew knew of it—asserting all the while that he did not; that there had never been any such agreement—I



would get my father to turn him away," was Geoffry's indignant remark.

"Let him be," said the old man. "The matter's over and done with, and Hester Barber's gone. A curious thing she should ha' found the paper only an hour or two before her death, wasn't it?"

He looked at Geoffry with his once-bright grey eyes, cold as steel. In the glance there was a strange keenness.

"Yes, it was curious," assented Geoffry. "Had the paper been unearthed in time, I hope—and think—my father would have respected it, and not have interfered with the poor old woman. I should have done my best to beg for her. I did as it was."

"Well, it's too late by some months now," said the Squire: "the cottage is gone, and the fine new road has taken its place. It's just one o' them cases, young man, that might be compared to a broken pitcher. Once in pieces, it can never be put together again."

"That's true," said Geoffry, a great sadness in his good-natured blue eyes. "No one was more sorry for poor Granny Barber than I. It was a hard case, and I told my father so. But he did not see it in the same light."

Old Mr. Arde nodded, and then shook his head, as if in strong condemnation.

"You think my father did wrong, I see, sir."

"Nay, I judge nobody, young man. But there's some plain words in an old Book that have run through my head, off and on, since the day I saw 'em demolishing her cottage. '*Remove not the old landmark, and enter not into the field of the fatherless.*' Sir Dene don't read his Bible, maybe."

"Oh, yes he does—sometimes," said Geoffry.

"Ah, then he forgot 'em, maybe! Anyway, the old homestead's gone, and Hester Barber's gone; and the cutting's broad and level, and a fine name you've given it."

"We did not give it; I don't know who did, sir."

"And it don't matter," rejoined the Squire.

At that moment a young maid-servant came in with the baby. When she saw that a stranger was present, she would have retreated; but Mrs. Arde took the child from her. A

very pretty, lively little baby, in a clean white frock, who sat up and looked independently at the company. The child attracted Squire Arde's attention, and he went up and patted its cheeks.

"Boy or girl, ma'am?"

"Girl, sir," replied Mrs. Arde.

"Ho ho, pretty one: ho ho! What! are ye laughing at the old man? D'ye want to come to him?"

For the baby had broken out into a smile, and was holding out its fat little arms. To the surprise of all present, perhaps also of himself, Squire Arde put his riding-whip on the table, and took the baby.

"What's her name?" he asked, as he sat down, and the little fingers caught hold of his bunch of seals.

"Mary, sir."

"Mary! The same that my own girl's was," muttered he, his voice dying away in a whisper. And he kissed the child.

"Here, take it, ma'am; I must be going," said he, getting up. "You don't look very peart, my dear," he added, in a fatherly tone, as Mrs. Arde received the child. "Try to get your wife's roses back, George Arde. Good-day to ye all."

They watched him walking down the path in the rain, the little shrunken figure, riding-whip in hand, George Arde attending him to open the gate.

Squire Arde's had been a sad history. In the bloom of his early manhood, when life looked fair before him, he had married a fair young girl to whom he was much attached. She gave birth to a child—a girl—and soon afterwards showed symptoms of insanity. Ever since then until her death, which had occurred only three years ago, she had been the raving inmate of a lunatic asylum. The little girl lived to be ten years old: and her death almost broke her father's heart. Since then he had been strangely altered: the kindly feelings of his nature seemed to have withered up at the grave, and he became a solitary, penurious old man. But this was chiefly applied to his sociable qualities; for no instance of oppression had ever been traced to him.

"How's hops, George?" he asked, as he was going through the gate.

"Pretty brisk, sir. Nothing much to complain of."

"I think I shall try that fellow. Good-morning."

On the following afternoon, Geoffry Clanwaring, leaving his wife at Malvern, went over to Harebell Farm to break the news of what he had done. Nothing, as he believed, had transpired; and he took it for granted that the marriage was as yet a secret. Mr. Owen happened to be in his barn when Geoffry rode in. Leaving his horse, Geoffry found him watching the threshing. Drawing the farmer outside, for the noise was deafening, Geoffry sat down on the shaft of a barrow, and told him what he had to tell.

"I know all about it, Mr. Clanwaring."

"Know it!" repeated Geoffry, starting up. But it might have struck him that the farmer listened very quietly, without any appearance of surprise. "Why, how did you learn it, sir?"

"From my daughter Mary. I took the pony-chaise into Worcester early this morning to fetch Maria home, her mother not being well. It could not be kept from me then."

A flush rose to the young man's ingenuous face. He held out his hand timidly.

"You will not refuse to forgive me, sir! And—to—bless us both?"

"My forgiveness will not materially affect you, Mr. Clanwaring," was the reply—and Geoffry could only note the strange, calm sadness of his tones. "Your father's will be of more moment than mine: and that, I fear, you will never obtain. I cannot forgive Maria."

"Oh, but she was not to blame; it was not her fault," ardently burst forth Geoffry. "She only yielded to me after months of persuasion."

"There lies her fault—that she yielded at all," spoke the farmer, gravely. "I had thought that I could place implicit trust in my daughters."

"She will be your dutiful daughter still, Mr. Owen, and her mother's too, although she is my wife. I'll bring her over to see you next week."

"Do you think you were justified in taking this extreme step, sir?"

"Not entirely," candidly avowed Geoffry; "but in a great degree. The only one to whom I cannot plead justification is my own father. To you and Mrs. Owen I may and do plead it. Had you not told me, sir, that you liked me personally; that you would, under favourable circumstances, have willingly given me Maria?"

Robert Owen drew in his refined and beautiful lips. It was true, so far.

"But circumstances were not favourable, Mr. Clanwaring. You know perfectly well that I alluded to your father. *Only* in the event of his being willing should I have been so."

"You see I was obliged to marry her as I have done," confessed Geoffry. "Had I asked my father's consent, he would have forbidden it altogether—and in the teeth of an absolute refusal I should not have liked to disobey him. As it is, no one forbade it, and I have only taken my own way."

"I should call that three parts sophistry, sir."

"And one part good wholesome honesty," returned Geoffry, his earnest eyes full of sincere meaning. "Believe me, Mr. Owen, it will all come right. Sir Dene will be angry at first, little doubt of it; but his anger will soon pass. I wrote to him last night, a good long letter, telling him all about it from the beginning, and sent it off to-day. He'll have it to-morrow morning."

"And a fine way he'll be in," remarked the farmer. "His first act will be to give me notice of ejectionment."

"How can you think he would be so unjust?" retorted Geoffry. "I have told him that you knew no more about it than he did, and would have been just as much against it. He'll make common cause with you in abusing me for a bit, I shouldn't wonder. *You* will forgive me, Mr. Owen?"—and once more the pleading eyes went out with the proffered hand.

"In one sense I forgive you—and that is, that I do not refuse to countenance you now. The marriage cannot be undone; therefore it would serve no good end to resent it. It is not against me that you have sinned, but against your own family."

"Thank you," said Geoffry, heartily, as his hand was at length taken. "And now, sir, I want you to hear me say that

your daughter is very dear to me. By Heaven's help, I will do my best and utmost to promote her happiness."

Mr. Owen shook his head in sadness. "You think so now; I do not doubt it; but in these unequal marriages the wife generally has to suffer from neglect in the long-run."

"Mine never shall," emphatically spoke Geoffry, his whole face burning with resentment at the implied suggestion. "If I know anything of myself, Mr. Owen, of my nature, my principles, my *love*, Maria will be as dear to me and as honoured by me in the far-off years to come, as she is on this, the morrow of our wedding day."

In the far-off years to come! Could poor Geoffry—could ill-fated Robert Owen—only have foreseen a shadow of the events that were destined to happen long before those far-off years should dawn! Astrologers have assumed to see into the future: but it is not one of the least mercies of God that all such knowledge is hidden from our view.

## CHAPTER VII.

### MEETING THE STORM.

DASHING through the gates of Beechhurst Dene in a noisy post-chaise and pair late at night, went Sir Dene Clanwaring and his eldest son. The chaise had been chartered from Sir Dene's hotel at Worcester, the Hop-pole, after the London stage-coach had deposited them in that city. Geoffry's "good long letter" was not received as soon by two or three days as it might have been, in consequence of Sir Dene's temporary absence from London. It had now brought him down in a fury, and John Clanwaring accompanied him to take part in the storm. He was a little, dark man, this eldest son and heir; proud, honourable, haughtily conscious of his position. As little like his father and Geoffry in person as he could well be; resembling, in fact, his dead mother. Bitterly wrathful was he against Geoffry for the—as he put it—degrading marriage: he *said* less than Sir Dene, but his anger was deeper, and would

be more lasting. John Clanwaring intended to mate with one of high degree, himself; the youngest brother, in India, had married a title: how could they brook the disgrace inflicted by Geoffry? John Clanwaring's private opinion was that he deserved hanging. As a matter of course he must be blotted out of the Clanwaring archives.

The housekeeper came forward in dismay as the chaise stopped; not having received any intimation of Sir Dene's return, she had been about to retire for the night. Sir Dene waved her off; said they wanted little supper; anything would do; but ordered a fire to be lighted instantly in his parlour, and Gander to be sent to him.

Gander had retired for the night: a faithful serving-man, some forty years old, who had spent the last half of them with his master in India, and was now butler at the Dene. Gander had gone to bed at nine on the strength of a frightful toothache. A red-faced man, he, with obstinate dark hair that stood up like porcupine quills, as though he were in a chronic state of rage or terror! The popular phrase might have been invented for Gander.

"Now, Gander," began Sir Dene, as soon as he appeared, "what is the truth about this infamous business?"

Gander knew what was meant, and wished himself miles away: he was very nearly as simple as his name. The offender, Mr. Geoffry, was a great favourite of his.

"Can't you speak out?" cried Sir Dene.

"Well, Sir Dene—I—I suppose you have heard of it," stammered Gander, who was a native of Worcestershire, and spoke its uncouth dialect—which we will not harrow the reader's ears with by transcribing.

"Is he really married?"

"Ay, sir, I believe so."

"And to one of those Owen girls!"

"Yes, sir; the only one left of 'em. Squire Arde's nephew married t'other."

"Squire Arde's nephew?" Gander had thrown that in his good-nature; a reminder that his young master was not the first gentleman who had gone to Farmer Owen's for a wife.

"Has he been here since?" thundered Sir Dene.



"No, sir. We hear he's staying at Malvern."

John turned round : he was holding first one foot, then the other, to the fire, now blazing up.

"Is it yet known in the neighbourhood, Gander?"

"Known, Mr. Clanwaring! Why, sir, it's the talk o' the place—and has been since the day after the wedding, when Mr. Geoffry came over to beg forgiveness of Farmer Owen——"

"Forgiveness of *him*!" interjected Mr. Clanwaring, with great scorn.

Gander detected the anger. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Clanwaring," he deprecated. "It's said he did do it. Farmer Owen is as grieved about it as anybody else can be. He told Squire Arde 'twas just a blow to him."

"Does he consider Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring beneath his daughter?" questioned the heir scornfully.

"It is because he is so much above her, sir, and because he knows it'll put Mr. Geoffry wrong with Sir Dene—that's why *he* feels the blow," cried honest Gander.

"Cease this, John," stormed Sir Dene, bringing his hand down on the table near which he stood. "What I want to know is, how he became acquainted with the girl? 'They could not be married off-hand without some acquaintanceship. *Some one* must have known there were meetings between them.'"

"As to that, Geoffry was always out and about like a bailiff," spoke John Clanwaring, whilst Gander was wisely silent.

"He had his work to do, John. Overlooking, and all that."

"Yes, sir. I imagine, though, that Harebell Farm was better looked after than all the rest of the land put together."

"Harebell Farm is not in my occupation, he has no business there at all," growled Sir Dene. And his son gave a push to the burning logs in the grate.

"The young lady has not been at home these five weeks past, Sir Dene—leastways, it's said so," added cautious Gander, not deeming it expedient to know too much. "The tale runs that she has been staying at Worcester with her sister, Mrs. Arde."

A sudden flash of enlightenment darted through Sir Dene's brain. He turned on his heel.

"Then that explains his visits to Worcester! John, I thought he had gone Worcester-mad. He was always there."

"And none could open their lips to inform Beechhurst Dene of it!" said John, bitterly. "Did *you* know nothing of it, Gander?"

"Not a word, Mr. Clanwaring. Of course, sir, I knew Mr. Geoffry was often going to Worcester. But it never came into my head to wonder why he went, nor was it my place to enquire."

Sir Dene was biting his hot lips. "Let's see—which day was it that he made this shameful marriage, Gander?"

"Last Thursday, sir—a week ago to-morrow. I wondered what business could be taking Mr. Geoffry so soon in the morning: his gig was waiting at the door almost before daylight. He had a cup o' coffee taken to his room, and came down with his light overcoat on. 'If I am not home by nine o'clock to-night, don't expect me, Gander,' says he. Upon that I asked whether he had the key of the cellaret—for I had been looking for it, Sir Dene, and couldn't find it. He unbuttoned his coat to feel in his pockets, then I saw he was smartly dressed."

"Smartly dressed!" echoed Sir Dene. "And did that give you no suspicion of what was going on?"

"Why, no, sir: how should it?" returned Gander.

"A man does not go out dressed up at dawn for nothing," stormed Sir Dene.

"I thought it might be the mayor's feast at Worcester, Sir Dene—if I thought anything: it's held in November. But, sir," added the man, with reason, "put it that I had suspected the truth—what end would it have served? I could not stop Mr. Geoffry from getting married—or attempt to stop him. He is my master, sir."

"You are a fool, Gander," growled Sir Dene.

Of what use discussing? Of what avail disputing as to what might have been? It could not undo the marriage, or part Geoffry Clanwaring from the young girl he had made his wife.

On the following day, Thursday, Geoffry drove his wife

over from Malvern to Harebell Farm. And there, happening to meet one of his father's servants, he learnt the fact that Sir Dene had come hastening home in a whirlwind of anger. Leaving Maria with her mother, he went at once to Beechhurst Dene.

There was a distressing and turbulent scene. Geoffry found more enemies than he had bargained for. Not only were his father and brother there, but his mother's sister, Miss Clewer, a precise maiden lady of more than middle age, had also arrived. The news of her favourite nephew's escapade had reached her at her home in Gloucestershire, and she had posted over in a chaise-and-four in dire consternation.

Going in by the back way, Geoffry met Gander in the passage. The butler started when he saw him, and took the opportunity to whisper a word of warning.

"They're all in the library, Mr. Geoffry, making a frightful outcry against you. The master, and Mr. Clanwaring, and Miss Ann Clewer—*she's* come over, sir. I've just carried in a bottle of water to keep her out of a fit of hysterics."

"Great cry and little wool, Gander," said Geoffry, with light good-humour. Nevertheless he shrank from the task before him. He would not so much have minded Sir Dene alone; but there was the wrath of his haughty brother in addition to be encountered; not to speak of his aunt's hysterics.

The library was a charming room, looking on to the green park, its beautiful old trees scattered here and there, and the tame deer. It had been the favourite sitting-room of the late Lady Clanwaring, and was lightly and tastefully fitted up with pale green brocade.

Geoffry opened the door quietly, and they did not observe him. Sir Dene was pacing the floor in a fume; John Clanwaring stood with his face to the window; Miss Clewer (a very thin lady with a flaxen "front") sat on a sofa, her bonnet and shawl on, just as she had alighted from the post-chaise, her eyes weeping indignant tears.

"Father!"

Then the commotion set in. What Gander had called a frightful outcry became more frightful still. Geoffry stood his ground before them, hoping for an hearing; upright, noble, his

fair Saxon face remarkable for its beauty. He strove to make the best defence he could : but it was not a moment calculated to enhance an offender's courage. Sir Dene interrupted him, utterly refusing to listen.

Not a word of reason could any one of them be brought to hear. Geoffry managed to put his hand into his father's, as he whispered a plea to be forgiven. Sir Dene flung away the hand and ordered him out of the house.

"Go!" he raved, pointing to the door. "Get your living in the best way you can. I cast you off from this hour."

And Geoffry went. At the turning of the passage stood Gander, with a face red and anxious.

"You've had a terrible time, Mr. Geoffry?" he whispered.

"There has been a good deal of noise, Gander."

"Ah. But see here, sir—don't be down-hearted. Sir Dene's temper's up—and nobody knows better than I do the amount of swearing it takes to cool it down again. One has to swear, living in India. Just let Mr. Clanwaring get away from the place—he's the bitterest against you, sir, and it edges on Sir Dene. When he's safe off and the house is clear, you come again, Mr. Geoffry, and try then. I can tell you one thing, sir—your father likes you far better than he likes *him*."

Geoffry nodded. He knew all this just as well as Gander. Whilst he was giving directions for his clothes to be sent to him, the library-door opened, and John Clanwaring came out.

"You will shake hands with me before I go, won't you, John?" he asked, when he had ended what he had to say to Gander—and the tone was a somewhat piteous one.

But John Clanwaring rejected the hand quite as unmistakably though less demonstratively than Sir Dene had done : and passed on, leaving a few cold and cutting words behind him.

So Geoffry went out of his father's home by the nearest and least ceremonious way. As he crossed Harebell Lane, he saw Robert Owen leaning on his gate.

"Well, how have you sped?" were the words that greeted him.

"Badly to-day," was the young man's candid answer. "It was to be expected, this first time. Things will come all

right later, Mr. Owen—at least with my father. I am sure of it.”

“Is Sir Dene very much incensed?” questioned Mr. Owen.

“Yes. Old Aunt Ann has come posting over—to make matters worse still. Between them all, I had not fair play. No play at all, in fact. It will be different—when I can get my father alone.”

“And, meanwhile, what are you to do for ways and means?”

Geoffry smiled. “That need not concern me yet, sir; I am not reduced to my last ten-pound note. Never having had fast outlets for my allowance, as some young fellows have, I saved it.”

Robert Owen shook his head. “The time may come when you will rue the day of your foolish marriage with Maria.”

“It never will,” said Geoffry, with emphasis. “She is a great deal too precious to me for that to come to pass.”

Mr. Owen sighed. Others had thought the same, and lived to find themselves bitterly mistaken. They were leaning with their arms on the gate whilst they talked.

“Did Sir Dene say anything about me, Mr. Clanwaring?”

“Not a word. Who’s that?”

The exclamation applied to a man passing down the lane: an ill-looking fellow, with a clumsy gait and slouching hat.

“I don’t know who it is,” was Robert Owen’s answer when the man was out of hearing, “but I suspect it is one of Mr. Randy Black’s choice customers. Had this business of yours, sir, not come between me and Sir Dene, I might have found it my duty to give him a hint as to what I think of the Trailing Indian.”

“Give it to me,” said Geoffry.

“I have nothing very tangible to go upon. Only that I feel sure evil doings of some kind are carried on in the house. I am out a good deal late in an evening with my stock, and hardly a night passes but I see ill-looking men slink up this lane on their way to the place. Sometimes they carry bundles with them.”

“Bundles!” cried Geoffry.

"Bundles they try to hide. I shouldn't like to make an affidavit that they don't contain stolen goods."

"No!" uttered Geoffry, in surprise. "Stolen goods! You mean smuggled goods, don't you?"

"I mean what I say, Mr. Clanwaring. I have had my suspicions for some time now, that the Trailing Indian is a receiving-house for them."

"Oh, but you know my father would never allow anything of that sort," returned Geoffry. "He would shut up the Trailing Indian to-morrow, and send Black to the right-about."

"He would have to prove it first," remarked Robert Owen. "Black holds his lease, and cannot easily be turned out. Put it down at smuggling only: it's not very reputable to have such a man for one's next-door neighbour."

"Black must be uncommonly bold, if it is anything beyond smuggling. Do you think he'd venture on it?"

"There never was a safer place for it than the Trailing Indian has been," observed Mr. Owen. "Moses Black occupied this farm, and of course was in his brother's interests; Mr. Honeythorn kept three or four servants at the Dene in his old age—and they only women. Why, a gang of smugglers might have gone up this lane nightly, and not be met or seen once in a twelvemonth! And you know how lonely the field way is across from Worcester!"

Geoffry Clanwaring took out his watch. "What time do you dine, Mr. Owen?"

"Dinner must be ready now, sir."

"Then I'll go up to the Trailing Indian after dinner, before we start for home. Mr. Randy Black must have a hint from me to mend his manners."

"I should have given him a hint myself long ago, only that I possess no right to interfere," said Robert Owen. "You may tell him so if you like."

When dinner was over Geoffry started for the Trailing Indian. He took the short cut over the fields—not much above five minutes' walk that way—and leaped the little stile at the end of the farm grounds, which brought him out opposite the inn. Black was standing at his door, and watched the exit. He touched his hat to his landlord's son.



"I want to speak to you, Black. Will you walk about with me in the lane for a minute or two?"

"Won't you come in, sir?"

"No, I haven't the time."

Pacing the lane before the house, beyond the chance of eavesdroppers, Geoffry Clanwaring gave the hint that he had come to administer. He did not actually accuse Black of unorthodox doings: only said that doubts had been aroused whether all things enacted at the Trailing Indian would bear the light of day. And he emphatically recommended Black to amend his ways, if they required amending—or he would hear more of it from Sir Dene.

"Robert Owen has been putting you up to this!" was Black's first comment, spoken with suppressed anger.

"No one has put me up to it—I come of my own accord. Though I may tell you that Mr. Owen has just the same opinion of the Trailing Indian that I have. He sees queer people stealing up here often enough at night."

A change passed over Black's evil face, which settled into a sneer.

"Owen has taken a spite against me, sir. I've known it long. My belief is, he wants to get me out of the Trailing Indian that he may have the place himself; that's why he invents these lies."

"Don't be absurd, man," rebuked Geoffry.

Black said he was not absurd. He flatly denied all insinuations, giving the Trailing Indian the very whitest of characters. It was as honest as Harebell Farm, he said, and honester.

"That's enough, Black—I don't want to go further into the matter," concluded Geoffry. "My warning is a friendly one. If needed, you will do wisely to act upon it; if unneeded—why, no harm's done."

"It's a shame that people should try to take away my character!" exclaimed the landlord, in a deeply injured tone. "There's not a ounce of baccy or a gill o' brandy comes into the Trailing Indian but what has been through his Majesty's Customs."

"As to smuggling, the popular belief is that the whole

country smuggles when it gets the chance—from a duchess downwards,” carelessly remarked Geoffry. “But,” he added, dropping his voice, “to harbour stolen goods, or those who deal with them, is a very different thing, Black. Don’t let the Trailing Indian be suspected of that. Good-afternoon.”

He vaulted over the stile, leaving Black looking as dark as his name. Geach came sauntering forth from the inn door, behind which he had been peeping all the while.

“What’s up, Randy? You look fit to eat your grandmother.”

“If this is not the work of that confounded rat, call me false for ever!” cried Black, stamping with passion.

“Whose work?” naturally asked Geach.

“Robert Owen’s.”

## CHAPTER VIII.

### JONATHAN DREW’S MIDNIGHT RIDE.

It was a frosty night in December. The roads were hard; the silvery moon was riding majestically through the sky. Mr. Jonathan Drew, Sir Dene’s bailiff, who had been a day’s journey on horseback, and was returning home across country wearied and worn, turned out of the turnpike road into Harebell Lane at its upper end; as if he were a traveller going to demand hospitality of the Trailing Indian.

He was well buttoned up from the cold, and had tied a handkerchief over his ears, which was surmounted by his high-crowned hat. The horse, weary as his master, sought the soft grass by the side of the lane, rather than the harder road, on which stones had recently been laid. Drew was feeling very cross. He had told his niece, who kept house and did for him, to have his supper ready by nine o’clock; but his business had detained him longer than he anticipated, and it was now past midnight. Very late for a rural district; no travellers were supposed to be abroad at so unearthly an hour.

The vague reports connected with the Trailing Indian

caused Jonathan Drew to turn his eyes on that hostelry as he passed it. It appeared to be closed, and lay steeped in silence : the moon played on the casements, behind which the curtains were drawn ; its inmates no doubt in bed and asleep.

"As I ought to be," growled Mr. Drew. "Get on, Dobbin. What ails ye?—we bain't home yet."

For the horse, finding the grass soft, had begun to take it easily, slackening his pace to a walk. Drew was about to urge him on with the spur, when a bright light, as if from a door suddenly opened at the side of the house, fell on the inn-yard. Drew let Robin's nose seek the ground then, and sat still. He had halted close to the stile that led into Mr. Owen's grounds—the same stile that Geoffry Clanwaring had leaped when he went to give that word of warning to the landlord of the Trailing Indian. The trees were bare enough at this season, but the holly hedge was high ; it encompassed man and horse within its shade, and he could gaze across at leisure into Mr. Black's yard, on which the moonbeams shone broadly, without fear of being observed.

Just for a short time, Drew, in spite of the moonlight and the other light, was slow in making out what was to be seen. His sight was excellent still, excepting for close print ; it was not that ; but there seemed to be some large, dark object, of indistinct form, drawn right across the yard. And when at length he slowly made out that and other things, Jonathan Drew's life-blood seemed to curdle within him.

It was a hearse. A hearse with four plumes at the corners. The end was drawn up to the side door, whence the light issued ; and figures seemed to be moving about. Four or five men were bringing something out of the house ; something the bailiff at length made out to be a coffin.

"Who can have died?" softly ejaculated Drew in bewilderment. "When I was there yesterday, I saw Black, and the ostler, and—no, I didn't see *her*."

It flashed into his mind that Black's wife had recently been very ill ; Mr. Priar had been attending her. Low fever, or something of that sort.

"It must be she that's in the coffin. Why didn't Black

say she was dead? And why on earth are they burying her at this witching hour?"

But, as reason gradually replaced the first surprise, Drew remembered they could not be burying Mrs. Black at this hour, unless they were going to do it without "bell, book, and candle;" ay, and without priest also. Recalling Black's character, the fact that he was popularly supposed not to hesitate at any dark deed, Jonathan Drew felt some ugly doubts creeping over him: and he asked himself why they should be burying Mrs. Black in this secret manner, unless it was for the purpose of concealing the death. And, if Black wished to conceal it—what was his reason for doing so?

A sudden neigh from one of the two horses harnessed to the hearse, caused Drew to start, and Dobbin to turn his head. Close upon that, the door of the vehicle was shut on what had been placed within it, and at once it began to make its way out of the yard.

Still as a statue sat Drew, hoping, nay, almost praying, that no piercing eye might discern him watching there. If, as he firmly believed, some evil deed was being enacted, it might not be safe for these desperate men to discover him. In the fear lest they should do so, he almost resolved to ride across boldly, ask whether Mrs. Black had died, offer his condolences in an unsuspecting manner, and then ride off at a gallop. But prudence told him it might be better to remain quiet. Concealed in the shadow of the holly hedge, the chances were that he would remain unseen.

On came the hearse, slowly and quietly. One man sat beside the driver, both wearing black cloaks and hatbands. Turning out of the yard to the left, it thus traversed the short distance to the end of the lane and then set off quickly along the high road, in the direction from which Drew had come. A high road that seemed to lead everywhere, London included.

Drew, watching in utter silence, heaved a sigh of relief. They had not seen him. Someone—the ostler he thought—came and shut the gate of the yard: after that, the side-door was closed, and all was quiet. For any signs that remained of what had passed, a spectator might have thought it had been a dream,

Drew walked his horse quietly on the grass until he came to the corner of the lane, near Harebell Pond; and then he rode away as if the deuce were pursuing him. He could not get Black's wife and the hearse out of his mind. Drew was neither timid nor superstitious; but the solitary lane struck him as unpleasantly lonely to-night, and he was glad to get out of it.

Be very sure that he took the near way home, by the new road, Dene Hollow. If ever Drew felt special cause to congratulate himself on Sir Dene's having made that road, he did so now. Turning off by the front gates of Beechhurst Dene, he reached it, lying white and cold in the moonlight. So bright that the ghostly branches of the bare trees cast their shadows in places here and there as clearly as they did in the morning sunshine.

"Now, I hope that wench, Pris, has kept my supper warm," muttered Drew, as his sure-footed horse began to descend. "She's a regular sawney, though, in some things. Shouldn't wonder if she——"

A start, a bound, and Jonathan Drew was thrown violently to the ground. The horse had started as if in some great terror, leaping from one side of the road to the other, across the footpath, against the bank. It was very nearly, if not quite in the same spot, where the accident had occurred to Sir Dene Clanwaring; and the sudden movement of the horse had been the same as that made by Sir Dene's horses.

How long Jonathan Drew might have lain there undiscovered, but for one fortunate circumstance, it was impossible to say; most probably until daylight. Mr. Priar came down the road, and found him as he was returning home from a late visit to Harebell Farm. George Arde, his wife and baby, had come there to spend a week or two and remain over Christmas: the child had been taken with convulsions in the afternoon; and Mr. Priar had considered it so much in danger that he went up again to the farm the last thing before bedtime, and remained till past midnight.

Drew lay insensible, his spurs and the riding-whip at his side disclosing the fact that he must have been thrown from his horse. The doctor tried to rouse him, but could not do

so ; and feared there might be concussion of the brain. Procuring assistance from the mill lower down—a rather difficult matter at that hour of the night—Drew was conveyed home.

It was not concussion of the brain ; at least, to any serious extent ; for Drew recovered his senses by the time he was at home, and his brain seemed uninjured. What Mr. Priar began to fear now was concussion of the spine. Drew seemed unable to move or stand ; but he *said* he was not hurt, and talked freely. Priscilla, his niece, said Dobbin had come galloping home, wild and trembling, and altogether as though in an extreme fright.

“ I can’t think what ailed the brute,” observed Drew to the doctor when they were alone. “ He never served me such a trick before.”

“ Dobbin was always so steady and sure-footed,” rejoined Mr. Priar.

“ He’s sure-footed enough ; ’twasn’t that,” said Drew, fractionally. “ The foolish beast took fright.”

“ What at ? ”

“ Why, at *nothing*,” returned Drew. “ Nothing that I could see. He wants a good hiding, and he’ll get it to-morrow.”

Mr. Priar privately thought Dobbin’s master would not be so soon able to give him one ; but he let it pass.

“ If the horse started, it must have been at something, Drew,” observed the surgeon. “ Perhaps a hare scudded across his path.”

“ There was neither hare nor rabbit,” retorted Drew ; whose temper was certainly not improved by his mishap. “ I tell ye, doctor, there was nothing. All around was just as still as still could be ; and the road was as bright as day.”

Mr. Priar did not contradict again. He ended his examination, found that no bones were broken, and was imparting that cheering news, when the patient ungratefully interrupted him.

“ Broken bones ! As if mine were young and brittle, that they should snap at a fall off a horse. I say, Dr. Priar, what was the matter with Black’s wife, up at the Trailing Indian ? ”

“ She has had low fever.”



"When did she die?"

"Die!" repeated the doctor in surprise. "Mrs. Black's not dead. She is better."

"Is she, though!" complacently returned Drew, as though it afforded him pleasure to contradict for contradiction's sake—as in fact it did. "When did you see her last, sir?"

"Two or three days ago," was the answer. "She is tolerably well now, and I took my leave of her."

"Well, then, I can tell you, doctor, that she is *dead*."

Looking up into Mr. Priar's face from the mattress on which he was lying, Drew related what he had seen that night. It sounded so strangely mysterious, that Mr. Priar at first thought his patient must be wandering; but Drew repeated the story minutely, and the idea passed away.

"Surely Mrs. Black cannot have died?" exclaimed the doctor, feeling a disagreeable thrill himself.

"It can't be nobody else," disputed Drew. "When I was up there yesterday, they'd no strangers in the house at all: Black was a-grumbling that not a soul had put up there for a week or two."

"No," said Mr. Priar, mechanically, his thoughts very deep just then; "the house has been empty of guests lately."

"Well, then—you can add up, doctor, can't you? Black was there, and the ostler was there; I saw 'em both: Mrs. Black I didn't see nor hear. Now, Mr. Priar, what I'd like to ask is this—whether there was anything wrong about the woman's death. Else why should Black conceal it, and smuggle her out of the place at midnight?"

"I don't like the look of it," said Mr. Priar, after a pause. "The woman was in no danger of death when I took my leave of her. Even if she had had a relapse—which I don't think was at all likely to happen—it could not have killed her so soon as this."

"I think it ought to be looked into," said Drew. "Black has the credit of being capable of acts as sable as his name. There was that talk of the travelling pedlar, you know—seen to go into the inn, but never seen to come out again—that has never been cleared up."

"I shall look into this," replied Mr. Priar, with decision.

"If the woman is dead, Black must render an account of how she died. I'll go up there in the morning."

Drew laid his hand on Mr. Priar's arm. "Doctor, don't bring in my name to Black; don't say that I watched 'em," he urged, some instinct prompting him to make the request. "Randy Black shan't be coming here to abuse me while I'm helpless: he'd have it all his own way. Let me get about again, and I'll soon tell him what I saw—and ask the reason of it."

Mr. Priar nodded unhesitatingly in compliance with the wish. Not only to oblige Drew, but also in the physical interests of that gentleman. He strongly suspected that poor Drew would soon be in a condition to render "abuse" from Black, or any one else, dangerously exciting. But he was just as unpleasantly impressed with this strange account of the midnight doings at the Trailing Indian as Drew had been; and he took his leave.

In the course of the following morning Mr. Priar went up to the inn. He saw his patients first; including Drew and Mrs. Arde's baby. Drew appeared to be in just the same state; there was no material alteration; the child was very much better. Indeed it seemed well again—after the elastic habits of babies. From Harebell Farm, the doctor went straight to the Trailing Indian, taking the near cut through the fields. As he crossed the stile between the high holly hedge, he thought of what Drew had said—that it was close to that spot that he and Dobbin had halted the previous night. When Black, peering forth from within his stable-door, saw the doctor cross it, he knew that he had come from Harebell Farm. The fact that he had been summoned the previous day to George Arde's little child was no news to him.

The Trailing Indian presented its usual silent and deserted features. No one was about that the doctor could see. He went over, his mind full of the departed woman. Stepping in at the front-door—which would make a show of keeping itself open for a few hours in the daytime—Mr. Priar passed on to the kitchen; and the first object his eyes alighted on was Black's wife with a bucket in her hand. No wonder, considering what his thoughts had been running on, that the sudden

apparition startled him more than if he had seen her in death.

"Bless my heart!" he exclaimed, in the fulness of his astonishment. "Why, Mrs. Black, I—I—had reason to fear that something had happened to you."

"I'm getting a good deal better and stronger, thank you, sir," she said. "What did you fear had happened to me?"

"Why, I thought that you—had died, in fact: or something of the sort. Who is it has died here?"

"Died here!" gasped Mrs. Black, suddenly struck into timidity—though her manner was timid at the best of times. "No one has died here, sir."

"Oh yes, they have," said the doctor, thinking it best to speak out, now he was in for it. "And was taken away in a coffin and hearse last night at midnight."

Mrs. Black's answer to this was to sink into the nearest chair. The doctor had rarely in his life seen a picture of fear such as this, as she shook from head to foot, her face and lips pale as death. Mr. Priar began to feel sorry to have entered on the subject with her: but in truth it had escaped him in his utter astonishment.

"What's all this row about?"

The interruption came from Black; who—to judge by his ill-suppressed savage aspect and white looks, almost as white as his wife's—must have overheard the conversation. The woman started from her chair and escaped, leaving him to deal with it.

Through thick and thin Black swore that nothing of the kind, as described by Mr. Priar, had taken place. That the only foundation for it lay in this:—About ten o'clock the previous night, just as he and his wife were going up to bed, a hearse drove into the yard; the two men accompanying it wanted to bait their horses and to take some refreshment themselves. At twelve o'clock, both men and horses drove away again. Black was ready to take his oath to this before any justice of the peace; as being all he knew about the matter. He had asked the men, he said, who it was they had in the hearse, and they answered that it was a lady who had died away from her home and was being taken to it across country for burial

Now perhaps Mr. Priar might have believed this ; might have concluded that Jonathan Drew's eyesight had not seen so much as it had fancied, but for the consciousness and terror displayed by Mrs. Black. What the mystery was, what the crime, he did not attempt to guess ; but it must be something.

"Do you mean to say, Black, that the coffin was not taken out of your house at this very side door and put into the hearse ?"

"That it never was," raved Black.

"See here, Black. I don't pretend to fathom this mystery. My information is correct, I believe ; the person who witnessed this has good eyesight. He saw the yard door open, saw the coffin brought out by three or four men at least, and put into the hearse. It was as light as day. You say the coffin was not taken out of the hearse at all, or I could have understood that it was merely being put back again."

Black's oath, taken in the first heat—that the coffin had never been removed from the hearse—began to burn his lips. He thought what a fool he had been.

"They didn't take it out that I saw," he growled. "Why should they? Where was the man standing—that you say watched all this mummerly?"

"Over the way ; by the stile."

Black threw back his head as if he had expected the answer. "Who was it, Mr. Priar?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you. It is of no consequence who it was."

Black laughed an evil laugh. He thought he knew as well as Mr. Priar could tell him. Who was likely to be about at that time of night, and at the stile, but Robert Owen? With his own eyes he had seen Owen leaning over it at night, as though watching his house, more times than one.

"He is a cursed sneak, whoever it was, to come out to spy at a neighbour's doings in the dark, Mr. Priar."

"He did not come out to do anything of the kind. What he saw he saw accidentally."

"Saw accidentally!" retorted Black, curling his lip in disbelief.

"I assure you, Black, it was so. He happened to be

passing. But that has nothing to do with the point in question. I must tell you candidly I think there is more in this matter than you would like me to believe."

"Any way, that's all I know about it," was Black's stolid reply. "If your friend wants better information, Mr. Priar, he must go after the hearse, and seek it for himself. Where was it now the men said they were bound to?—Somersetshire, I think. Joe, come here," he called, as the ostler passed the side door. And the man appeared.

"Tell the doctor all about that hearse that was at the inn last night," continued Black. "He has come up with a story that the Trailing Indian sent away a coffin in it."

Joe, a short, powerfully-built man, with a swinging gait, as if he might sometime have been a sailor, looked stolidly from one to the other.

"I know nothing o' the hearse, save that it stopped here to bait," said he.

"What time did it come?—and what time did it go away? and who was with it?—why don't you speak?" cried his master, stamping his foot impatiently.

"It come in about ten—as near as I can tell; and it stopped a good two hours. The horses had a feed o' corn; and the two men had some'at to eat and drink in here; I dun' know what; the missus do; she served 'em. They'd got a lady in the hearse, the driver telled me, and was carrying her off to her own family's place for burial."

Either master and man were telling the truth, or they had learned their tale by heart. Which of the two it was, Mr. Priar could not quite decide, in spite of his suspicions. But, as Mrs. Black had assuredly not been carried away in the hearse, and it might have been simply as Black stated, the doctor did not consider that he was called upon to further investigate the matter. Intimating as much to Black, who did not appear to receive it with much gratitude, he took his departure.

"What did all that mean?—and why was I called upon to speak?" then demanded the ostler of his master.

"Well, we were watched last night, Joe; that's all. The load was seen to come out o' here, and watched into the hearse,"

Joe said a word he might have been fined for.

"*Watched!* Who by, master?"

Randy Black extended his hand and pointed in the direction of the stile over the way. And Mr. Joe broke out into several ugly words, joining them with the name of Robert Owen.

Could Mr. Priar only have known the ill he unconsciously worked that day to the innocent master of Harebell Farm!

One of the first visitors to Mr. Jonathan Drew's bedside was Mary Barber. Going down to Hurst Leet for some yeast the morning after the accident, she heard the news; Drew had been thrown from his horse in the night, and was supposed to be seriously injured. "I'll call in and see him," thought she. "He served mother that ill trick about the cottage, but we are kind o' relations, after all; and I'll go in." Accordingly, just about the time that Mr. Priar was at the Trailing Indian, Mary Barber was with the injured bailiff.

"Where are you hurt, Drew?" she asked, putting down her jug.

"I can't say where I'm hurt," retorted Drew, fractiously. "I don't feel hurt nowhere much—but I've no more power to stand than a child. I ought to have been at Leigh-Sinton to-day, about some stock. Drat that beast of a Dobbin!"

"How came the beast to throw you?" was Mary Barber's next question.

Drew told her, just as he had told others, that he did not know how it was, or why it was. He described the sudden start and spring, the evident terror that had assailed the horse, all from no apparent cause. Mary Barber listened in silence, her mind occupied.

"Drew," said she, "it must have been the Shadow that frightened him."

"You are a fool," returned Drew.

"You called me that before, Drew, when I told you what mother said about the shadow on the Hollow."

"The old woman was dreaming when she said it," returned Drew.

"She was dying; not dreaming. And, Drew, dying people



sometimes get a strangely clear insight into things. What the shadow she saw might be I don't know any more than you do. But I am sure she did see it : and I think it stands to reason it was that, and nought else, that startled Sir Dene's horses. I should say the same thing startled Dobbin."

"Why don't you say pigs fly?" roared Drew.

"Because pigs don't fly," was the matter-of-fact answer. "Anyway, Drew, putting what mother said out of the question, Dene Hollow doesn't seem to be a lucky road. If it never should be, one ought not to wonder. It was cut out of oppression ; it was formed out of a poor old woman's sobs and tears ; it broke her heart, and took her life before its time. And God's blessing, perhaps, will not lie upon such a work as that."

"Granny Barber was almost eighty. There was no reason in a mummy of that age standing in the light of other folks."

"Come, be civil, Drew, towards the dead," advised Mary Barber. "Being come to that age was all the more reason why Sir Dene and you should have let her alone. She couldn't be expected, in the nature of things, to live much longer. I told Sir Dene so. If she'd been only a middle-aged woman, it might have been right to ask her to go out. Or, let's say, less cruel."

"It's a fine level road ; no better in the county," cried Drew, going beside the question. "I don't know what ye would have."

"Anyway, it don't seem to carry travellers over it in safety," retorted Mary Barber, who never failed to have the last word. And Drew, recalled to the thought of his own mishap and present condition, turned his eyes away with a groan.

"I don't wish to speak a word to hurt you, Drew, now that you are lying here, but I can't help saying that if you had honestly told Sir Dene mother had that paper from Mr. Honeythorn—for you knew it just as well as she did—the road might never have been made, and this might not have happened."

"You are a great stupe !" raved Drew.

"Well, I must be going," she said, taking up her jug, "for they're waiting at home for this barm. And I wish ye well through, Jonathan, and will look in again upon ye."

Hurrying away through the trees by which the house was surrounded, she encountered Squire Arde, who was coming to ask particulars of Drew's mishap. Mary Barber stayed to give them to him, winding up the narrative with Priscilla's account of the state in which the horse had arrived home.

"Drew says he don't know what frightened the horse; Sir Dene didn't know what frightened his horses; and perhaps it don't much matter what it was," she resumed. "But I'm afeard of one thing, sir—that the new road is not going to be a lucky road. I've just said so to Drew."

"Seems not to have been over lucky yet," returned Squire Arde.

"Drew goes on about its being a beautiful road, and so it is," said Mary Barber. "But, you see, Squire, 'twas made out o' my poor mother's sighs and tears; and that's not a good legacy."

"I never liked that business," remarked Squire Arde, shaking his head. "'Twas no concern of mine; but I wouldn't ha' done it had I been Sir Dene. It's not well to remove your neighbour's landmark."

"It's an odd thing, sir, when you come to think of it, that those two should come to grief on the road: Sir Dene and Drew."

"Ay," said the Squire absently. "How's that baby up at your place?"

"All right again now, sir. It was only her teeth. Many babies get convulsions in cutting their teeth. A fine child it is; as pretty as its mother."

"Ay, so it is. How's the mother?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to be a croaker, Squire Arde, but I'm afraid we shan't have her long among us. Mr. George sees it, too, I think. She seems to be wasting away as poor young Tom wasted."

"Tom! Who's Tom?" asked Squire Arde.

"Tom Owen. He was the youngest, sir; a beautiful young lad, as well-looking as his father. He died in the old place, at Hallow, before we came to live here."

"Well, it's a very nice baby: 'twould be a pity for it to be left motherless," concluded the Squire, as he went on to Drew's house.

## CHAPTER IX.

## SIR DENE'S PERPLEXITY.

SIR DENE CLANWARING sat in his bow-windowed parlour at Beechhurst Dene, very busy and very restless. The table was strewn with paper and parchments; the secrétaire against the wall opposite the window was open. It seemed that Sir Dene did nothing but make pilgrimages from the papers on the table to the papers in the drawers and pigeon-holes of this piece of furniture. Altogether, the papers appeared somewhat disordered; but, in truth, they were not half as much so as was Sir Dene himself.

The days had gone on; Christmas was past; nearly three weeks had elapsed since the accident to Jonathan Drew. And Mr. Drew's injuries had turned out to be of a very serious nature. After the first day or two of uncertainty, fresh advice was called in from Worcester; and it was decided that the spine was permanently injured. Drew was removed to Worcester, to the house of his widowed daughter, that he might have good nursing and advice. His furniture followed him, and the lodge was left empty: for it was known that he would never be of use again. In one sense this was less of a misfortune to Drew than it would have been to many, for he had saved money and was comfortably off.

But the state of perplexity it threw Sir Dene Clanwaring into was not to be told. Drew had united the offices of bailiff and steward: had not only been manager of the estate out of doors, but had kept the accounts connected with it. Many of these papers on the table had been brought up from his house. Drew was too ill now to be consulted, or to be asked even a single question; and Sir Dene felt helpless as a child.

He knew absolutely nothing about the deeds and other matters. One person alone, of all the world, could have helped him out of his dilemma: and that was his discarded son, Geoffry.

Opening this parchment, folding that, glancing at one

receipt, throwing aside another, fuming and fretting ! Whilst Sir Dene was thinking himself worse off than the babes in the wood, Gander entered.

"Farmer Hill has got me to come in and ask whether you'll be likely to keep him much longer, Sir Dene. He says he has a sight o' things to see about this morning."

Sir Dene groaned. He was no nearer finding the papers necessary to the business on which Hill had come up than he had been an hour before.

"I don't know an iota about it, Gander ; that's the fact ; and I can find nothing. Tell Mr. Hill to call again to-morrow morning : I'm sorry to have kept him waiting. And—here, Gander. Is Mr. Clanwaring in ?"

"Mr. Clanwaring's lying on the sofa in the library, Sir Dene."

"Ask him to step here."

John Clanwaring appeared, a book in his hand. It was one of the volumes of a favourite work of the day. Sir Dene, in his perplexity, appealed to his son.

"You are younger than I am, John, and your brain's clear. Mine's clear enough, too, in one sense of the word ; but I've never been used to this sort of thing. Do you think you could help me ?"

"In what way ?" asked Mr. Clanwaring—who had unwillingly dragged himself from London to spend Christmas at Beechhurst Dene, and intended to get away from it the moment he could do so decently.

"Well, in—in looking into things. Getting some of these papers straight, for instance : and—mastering the various matters connected with the estate."

John Clanwaring quite thought he had not heard aright. "I, sir ? I could not possibly undertake anything of the kind."

"There's no one else so fitting," rather sharply spoke Sir Dene. "It will be your own proper business some time."

"I expect when that time comes—which I hope will not be yet awhile, father," he added in a dutiful parenthesis—"that I shall chiefly leave it to a steward, as you have done."

"It is an awful trouble that Drew should have become incapacitated in this sudden way ! Look at all these papers,

John!—I can't make head or tail of them. And there are twice as many more down at his house."

John Clanwaring looked from the papers on the table to those in the *secrétaire*. He would as soon have meddled with the Augean stables.

"And things are going on out of doors nearly as badly as they are within," resumed Sir Dene. "The men—when they work at all—do it all the wrong way : plough up meadows, and leave—— For goodness' sake, don't mix the papers, John ! I've had work enough in sorting them."

For John Clanwaring, seeking a place on which to deposit his book, had pushed some of the papers one upon another.

"You won't try what you can do, then, John?"

"As I should be sure to make a mess of it, sir, I had better not."

"At least you might ride about a bit, and direct out of doors."

"I should only mislead others : knowing nothing about it myself, or what your wishes are. Besides, father, I shall be gone again in a day or two now. My home is in London, you know, sir."

"What will you do when you come into the place after me ? Whoever holds Beechhurst Dene should live on it."

"As of course I shall. It will be different then."

Sir Dene sat looking straight out before him. Some solution must be found to his present perplexity. His son spoke.

"If I were you, sir, I should engage a new bailiff forthwith. Some man of experience, who can grasp these matters at once, in Drew's place."

"Should you !" retorted Sir Dene. "He'd be more of a stranger to it than I am : and who is to put him in the right way, I should like to know ? There's only one man able to grasp them : and that's your brother Geoffry."

Mr. Clanwaring drew in his thin lips, and superciliously took up his book. He considered it an insult to the rest of the family for Geoffry to be so much as mentioned in their hearing.

"If I put down a few questions upon paper, John, would you mind riding over to Malvern, and getting Geoffry to answer them ?"

"I should mind it very much indeed, sir. Nothing would induce me to go on a mission to *him*. If absolutely necessary that some one should see him, send Gander."

Sir Dene, vexed with John, vexed with everyone, said no more : and John Clanwaring took the opportunity to return to his sofa and his novel. Sir Dene had missed Geoffry all along ; but never so much as now, at the close of the year.

After the first burst of indignation had blown over, on the discovery of the marriage, Sir Dene had calmed down wonderfully. John went away again, Miss Clewer took herself off ; there was only Sir Dene at home, and he felt very lonely. Not an hour of the day but he thought of Geoffry, who had never before given him an undutiful look or word, and had been his constant companion of late years ; and he would often catch himself wishing that he could see Geoffry riding up the path. Applying to Geoffry to help him out of this dilemma, resulting from Drew's accident, seemed therefore more easy of accomplishment to Sir Dene than if his feelings had retained their first bitterness against his son.

An hour longer he sat over these confusing papers, never touching them ; attempting no further to reduce them to order. Had he seen any other way out of the trouble, had any living person, excepting Geoffry, been able to help him, he would not have sought his discarded son. But there was no one else ; and so Sir Dene could not well help himself. He waited, shilly-shallying, until the afternoon was passing ; and then, saying nothing to John of his intention, ordered his horse and rode away in the direction of Malvern. In his heart of hearts, Sir Dene was glad of the opportunity of once more seeing Geoffry.

"*He* never turned a deaf ear to any request of mine, as John does," thought Sir Dene, bitterly. He would often feel a little bitter with his eldest son.

At this time Great Malvern was a very different place from what it is now ; the houses scarcely outnumbered the hills. The cottage to whose lodgings Geoffry had taken his wife was a small abode nestling near the foot of the hill on the road leading to St. Ann's Well. They had been married nearly two months now, and were in it still.

Christmas would have been dull for the young wife in these



confined lodgings but for the intense love she bore her husband. If hallowed by his presence, all places were a paradise to her. They were invited to spend Christmas Day at Harebell Farm, and Geoffry Clanwaring accepted it, because it would give his wife pleasure. However, the day before Christmas Eve a deep snow set in, rendering the roads bad for travelling ; and so they stayed at home. A delusive dream had lain on Geoffry : that his father might relent in the blessed Christmas-tide, and summon him and his young wife to Beechhurst Dene.

This was the last day of the old year ; and it was Geoffry's birthday. 'Twenty-six to-day. He had suddenly remembered it as they were seated at their early dinner, and proclaimed it to his wife.

"Oh, Geoffry ! —never to have told me ! Never to have let me wish you many happy returns of it this morning ?"

"I forgot all about it. You can wish it me now, love."

She got up, and put her arms about his neck, whispering softly, tears filling her eyes with the intensity of her emotion. Geoffry held her to him whilst he thanked her and kissed her. Kissed her as fondly as he had done on their wedding-day.

"We ought to have made a festival of it, Geoffry," she said, going back to her seat ; "a plum-pudding at the very least. And there is only cold beef for you !"

"Cold beef is as good as anything else, Maria."

"I shall make a feast for tea."

He laughed a little. "What will it be ? Roast peacock ?"

"Jam ; and pikelets ; and Malvern cakes."

"Extravagant girl !"

"But it won't be your birthday again until next year."

When dinner was over, and Geoffry sat thinking of things, it occurred to him to wonder whether his birthday was being remembered at Beechhurst Dene, and whether a letter of repentance, written to his father on that day, might produce any softening towards him. It would be necessary to try to induce Sir Dene to relent if possible, for his little hoard of money would not last for ever. He and Maria were practising economy ; but times were hard at that period, and provisions were dear.

"A letter will do no harm, if it does no good," decided

Geoffry. "And in any case I should like to wish my father a happy New Year." So he drew his chair to the table and wrote.

The snow had disappeared some days now, and this day was very fine ; but early in the afternoon that dense mist came on well known to the dwellers under the Malvern Hills. It used to be worse than it ever is now : perhaps the mist found itself unable to contend with the town the place has grown into. At half-past three o'clock, when Geoffry folded his letter, he could scarcely see to address it.

Sitting down by the fire, he stirred it into a blaze, and drew his wife to him. She was putting up her work, for it was too dark to continue it.

"Just look at the mist, Geoffry !"

"Ay. You cannot go out now, young lady, for your Malvern cakes. I shan't let you."

She had been saying that she would go with him when he went to post his letter. Maria looked at the mist a little wistfully.

"You will bring the cakes in for me instead, won't you, Geoffry ? And the pikelets."

"I dare say !"

"And we will have tea early, and shut out the mist—say, half-past four. Oh, Geoffry, it will be such a happy evening !"

"You little syren !"

He sat on, talking with her of the letter, and the probable effect it might have on Sir Dene ; and the minutes slipped by. When the clock struck four, Geoffry rose to go on his errand.

"How many pikelets, and how many cakes ?"

"Three pikelets," she answered ; "two for you and one for me. And three cakes." "Malvern cakes," it should be stated, had in those days a world-wide fame.

"And the jam you talked about ? I'm sure the shops will take me for a porter."

"Jam ! Oh, I have plenty of that. Mamma gave me some jars of several sorts, packed in a basket, when we were last there. Don't you remember, Geoffry ? We brought it home in the gig."

Geoffry Clanwaring went into the bedroom for some silver, and departed. Maria called the landlady, asked her to bring

in the best tea-things, and said there would be pikelets to toast. That worthy person immediately turned restive—which she had a habit of doing. The best tea-things she made no objection to ; but the pikelets were pronounced “unpossible. She had just raked up her kitchen fire, and was going out later to watch-in the New Year with a friend. Pikelets couldn’t be toasted at black bars.”

“Never mind, Mrs. Brown ; I’ll toast them here,” said Maria cheerfully—who, young and timid, was quite under Mrs. Brown’s dominion. “Bring in the butter, please, and the toasting-fork.” And Mrs. Brown bestirred herself.

“I must wear my best frock this evening,” thought Maria, as she watched the woman lay the table ; “and I will go now, whilst Geoffry’s away, and surprise him. Then I shall be ready to do the pikelets.”

The first thing Maria saw when she entered the bedroom was the letter lying on the dressing-table. Geoffry must have laid it down, and forgotten it. She dressed, then carried the letter to the other room, and waited, knowing he would come back for it.

Presently he appeared, with the pikelets, the cakes, and a beautiful pink camellia, that he had picked up somewhere, for Maria. She strenuously declared that it ought to be in his own coat, as it was his fête day. Geoffry laughed, and fastened it in her dress, saying that a dandelion would be more in his way.

“Do you know that you left Sir Dene’s letter at home, Geoffry ?”

“I know it now. The hunt I had in all my pockets when I went to put it into the box amused the village boys amazingly.”

He took the letter, and went out again. It was her wedding-dress that Maria had put on ; the India muslin she was married in. No opportunity had arisen for wearing it since ; and perhaps it was rather light in texture for this evening. Maria deemed it the most appropriate dress in the world—for was it not her husband’s birthday?

With her beautiful hair falling ; with no ornament in the delicate robe, excepting the pink camellia ; with her pretty white neck and arms bare, after the fashion of the day, Maria Clanwaring returned to the parlour as charming a picture as

man's eyes ever rested on. The candles were lighted on the table ; and —if she stole a glance of admiration at herself in the glass, vanity itself would have forgiven the sin.

"Geoffry will not know me," she softly said, as she knelt down to toast the pikelets. "Why!—how soon he is back again!"

For the front door had been knocked at, and answered. Steps approached the room ; the door was flung wide, just as Geoffry flung it.

"Is Geoffry Clanwaring here?"

The voice was a strange voice, proud and stern. Maria started up, almost dropping the pikelet into the ashes : and felt ready to drop too when she saw Sir Dene. They stood, gazing at each other : Maria in trembling dismay ; Sir Dene in involuntary admiration.

Never in all his life had he seen so lovely a picture. She looked, in this white dress, little more than a child, with her smooth falling curls, her blushing cheeks, and her delicate and refined face. Gently putting down the fork, she moved a little nearer, in shrinking modesty, to receive him.

"You are my son's wife, I suppose, young lady?"

"Yes, sir."

"And one to make any son forget his allegiance for," muttered Sir Dene to himself. "Hanged if I can be sure I should not have done as Geoff did!"

"Will you take a seat, sir?" she ventured to ask.

"I'll shake hands with you first, my dear," he said. And, taking her hand, he stooped and kissed her.

The tears rushed into Maria Clanwaring's eyes at the unexpected kindness. Sir Dene saw them, and kissed her a second time.

"Where is Geoffry?" asked Sir Dene, sitting down.

"He has gone out to post a letter : it is to you, sir. He will not be long."

"And you were toasting pikelets for tea," said Sir Dene, observing the good things on the table.

"The landlady had let her fire go low, sir, and could not do them. It is Geoffry's birthday."

"His birthday!" cried Sir Dene. "I forgot it."

"That is why we are having an extravagant tea," she continued, deeming some sort of explanation necessary.

"And why you are so prettily dressed?" added Sir Dene, smiling, as he glanced at the table.

"Yes, sir. This is my best white frock. I"—was married in it, she had been about to add, but remembered herself in time—"had just put it on. Geoffry brought me home this beautiful flower."

A beautiful flower, no doubt : but a sweeter flower she. A simple, guileless girl : *that* was evident. Sir Dene had been in the room only two or three minutes, and he felt that he already almost loved her. The next to enter was Geoffry, who stood in unmitigated astonishment.

Sir Dene did not shake hands with his son. An idea struck him that it might be a compromise of dignity to do that all at once. He told Geoffry, speaking distantly, of the difficulty he was placed in through the accident to Drew, and that he should require his assistance to disentangle affairs from the confusion they appeared to be in. Geoffry at once replied that he would do anything and everything in his power. Seeing them thus engaged, Maria quietly resumed her toasting. Geoffry came up, and would have taken the fork from her.

"I'll do this, my dear—if it has to be done here? What's Mrs. Brown about?"

"She has let her fire out. Geoffry, let me do it," she whispered. "Indeed, I would rather! Stay with Sir Dene."

So Geoffry relinquished the fork and returned to his father. When the pikelets were buttered and the tea made, she waited by the fire in silence. Geoffry looked at the table and looked at his father.

"Would you take some tea with us, sir?" he asked, with much deprecation.

"I don't mind if I have a cup," said Sir Dene. "The mist has got down my throat."

So they all sat down together, Maria's hand shaking visibly when she handed him his cup. "A modest, gentle girl, and every inch a lady—as poor Geoff said," again thought Sir Dene. "She's worth a dozen of John's grand London wenches, with their patched and powdered faces."

Sir Dene partook of the good things with much relish ; pikelets, cakes, and jam ; and drank three cups of tea. Then he said he must go, unless he would be quite benighted. He did not kiss Maria when he went away : but he shook hands cordially, and called her "my dear." It was arranged that Geoffry should meet Sir Dene at Drew's house, as early as he could get there after breakfast in the morning. Geoffry walked down with his father to the small inn—the Unicorn—where he had left his horse ; and saw him mount. Sir Dene gave him his hand.

"Thank you, father, for coming over," said Geoffry, in low tones that were full of feeling. "Thank you doubly for speaking kindly to my wife."

"Well, you see, Geoffry, she's very nice and pretty."

"She is more than that, father. Good-night, sir."

Standing over the fire with his wife when he got back, his arm round her waist, her head leaning against him, Geoffry Clanwaring spoke of the hopeful turn affairs seemed to have taken. He had been feeling the estrangement from his father and his home far more deeply than he had ever cared to tell his wife.

"My father may not take us into full favour quite at once, Maria ; it is not to be expected ; but I think the way had been paved for it."

"He kissed me, Geoffry," she whispered, her eyes shining through their glad tears.

"Kissed you !"

"He kissed me twice ; he did indeed. It was when he first came in."

"Thank God !" thought Geoffry. But he said nothing. Only held his wife the closer.



## CHAPTER X.

## THE BAILIFF'S LODGE.

REST assured that Geoffry Clanwaring did not let the grass grow under his horse's feet in riding over to Hurst Leet the following morning, New Year's Day. Break of day had seen him in the saddle. At Drew's house he found Simmons the gamekeeper, who had been placed there to take care of things upon the bailiff's departure.

It was a very pretty place, this dwelling, commonly called the bailiff's lodge. Mr. Honeythorn used to say it was far too good for Jonathan Drew. Sheltered amidst trees and shrubs, with the same sort of yellow jasmine on its walls that had been on the widow Barber's, it was as rural a lodgment as any in the district. There were two sitting-rooms : one, used as an office by Drew, contained papers and things relating to the estate ; the other had not been used at all ; for Drew had found the kitchen good enough for his meals and evenings. There were three chambers above : two large, one small.

Geoffry Clanwaring sat down at once to the papers ; and when Sir Dene arrived, they were all in order. For a good half-hour Sir Dene did his best to master them ; and found it a failure.

"Geoffry," said he, "I shall make nothing of these things myself : my capacity does not lie in this direction ; and John won't attempt to help me—though he ought to do so. You will have to come back again."

"I should desire nothing better than to be allowed to come back," said Geoffry, with candour.

"Not to Beechhurst Dene," hastily rejoined his father, fearing he might be misunderstood. "That could not be. I should have your brothers up in arms ; John especially. Reginald, happily, is at a safe distance. He can write sharp letters, though."

"I did not think of coming back to Beechhurst Dene, sir," said Geoffry quietly.

"That's well. Geoffry, I must speak plainly, and then we

shall understand each other," continued Sir Dene. "Marrying as you did, you were guilty of an act that was unjustifiable, involving both disobedience and ingratitude. Had your wife been different from what she is, had she been vulgar or upstart, for instance, I could never have forgiven you. As it is -well, I must partly forgive you. Though I cannot receive you on the familiar footing of old, I will in a degree extend you my countenance. If you are not above taking the management of things in Drew's place, why, I will make it worth your while."

"I am not above it, I assure you, sir," said Geoffry: "but would accept the post, and thank you for it. After all, I shall only be doing what I have done ever since you bought the property. More responsibility will lie on me; somewhat more work; that is the only difference, sir."

"You would have to live on the spot, you know."

"Of course. Why could I not have this house, sir?"

Sir Dene coughed. With all his vexation, with all Geoffry's misdoings, he had not liked to suggest that a son of his should succeed to the bailiff's cottage.

"It would be the best and most convenient thing. But I feared you might not like it, Geoffry."

Geoffry Clanwaring smiled. "After our two rooms at Malvern, sir, I think Maria and I shall fancy ourselves in a palace here."

"Then all's settled, Geoffry," concluded Sir Dene gladly. "I'll have some furniture put into it, and you had better move over without delay. Or stay. Do you get the furniture," added Sir Dene, on second thoughts: "you know best what will please your wife. Pay for it out of the funds: you'll have plenty in hand now."

"Thank you very much, father."

"And now come up to Beechhurst," said Sir Dene. "The papers there are in a hopeless mess: and Hill no doubt is fuming at being kept waiting two mornings running. He was already there when I came away."

They walked up the new road, and it was only natural that the spot should bring up the remembrance of Drew's accident. Geoffry, who had not heard much about it, inquired how sure-footed Dobbin came to throw his rider.

"No one seems to know," replied Sir Dene. "Drew says he doesn't. It makes me think of our accident, Geoffry: we never could imagine what possessed the horses, you know. 'Twas just in the same spot, too."

"It seems odd," said Geoffry.'

"Our mishap was odd—and to me always will be—but I don't say as much for Drew's. Many a horse, brave as a lion by day, will start at shadows cast by the moonlight. Besides——"

'Besides what, sir?' asked Geoffry, for Sir Dene had suddenly paused.

"Well, Geoff—though I wouldn't mention it to anyone but you," broke off Sir Dene confidentially—"I cannot help thinking that Drew must have had a drop more than was good for him at the time. He had had a long and tedious journey, and the night was cold. If a man's seat is not steady, a slight thing will unhorse him; the very fact of Dobbin's galloping down the hill might do it."

"I have never once seen Drew the worse for drink," was Geoffry's reply to this.

"Neither have I—don't think I would asperse the man causelessly," returned Sir Dene. "Priar, too, says he was sober. Still, there's a lurking doubt in my mind that he was not himself: and I don't say it without a reason."

"What is the reason, sir?"

Upon that, Sir Dene told the tale—calling it a cock-and-bull story—that had been told to him: of what Drew saw, or thought he saw, at the Trailing Indian. Sir Dene altogether disbelieved it. The surgeon had informed him of Black's version; and Sir Dene, judging by common sense, believed that to be true. Geoffry listened in silence.

"Now, what I think is this, Geoff: that no man could go the length of fancying he saw what Drew fancied, unless his imagination and eyesight were both a little confused by drink. If it was so, this would account for the accident. Drew confesses that he was riding down here at a tolerable pace."

Sir Dene turned his eyes on the road as he spoke. They were close to the spot.

"Did Drew hold to his story afterwards?" asked Geoffry.

"In the most positive manner. He says he was never more sure of anything than that the coffin came out of the inn. Of course, having fancied he saw it, it became impressed upon his imagination."

"For my own part, I should not be disposed to trust to a word asserted by Black," remarked Geoffry. "I would rather believe Drew."

"Nonsense," said Sir Dene. "Drew's story carries improbability on the face of it; whereas Black's has been confirmed. There was no one ill at the Trailing Indian: no one was stopping there: so how could any one die?"

"In what way was Black's account confirmed?" asked Geoffry.

"He said that the hearse merely called at the inn to bait the horses. It drove in about ten o'clock, he told Priar. Now, it happened that some man Priar knows saw a hearse turn off the high road at that hour and drive in to the inn-yard. So far, Black was confirmed."

"Yes," acquiesced Geoffry. But it crossed his mind that the hearse must equally have driven in sometime, had its errand been to fetch the dead away. "Have you seen Black, sir, and questioned him upon the subject?"

"Not I," said Sir Dene. "Why should I? He would probably tell me to my face that hearses are just as much at liberty to demand refreshment at his house as carriages. In short, I have no doubt whatever that the whole explanation, both of that and the subsequent accident, lies in the fact that Drew had taken a glass too much."

"It may have been so, sir. But I have a bad opinion of Black. I don't think he would stick at much."

"It is just this, Geoff, as I believe; that Black's case is an illustration of the old saying, 'Give a dog a bad name, and hang him.' He is not a white sheep by any means; but I dare say report makes him out a great deal worse than he is in reality. Come along."

In going up the slight ascent, Sir Dene, quite unconsciously, took Geoffry's arm. Forgetting the escapade of which his son had been guilty, quite forgetting the late estrangement, he

put his arm within Geoffry's as he used to do. A gentleman, who happened to be walking amidst the trees on the high bank above them that skirted the road, approached the edge and cautiously leaned over. It was the heir, John Clanwaring. He had recognized his father's voice, and wondered who he was with.

And if John Clanwaring had seen Sir Dene familiarly walking with a baboon, he could not have felt more utterly astonished. Arm-in-arm with Geoffry! John Clanwaring closed his eyes for a moment and opened them again, thinking perhaps some mist had obscured his sight. But no. It was Geoffry the renegade! The heir stood watching them up, and wondering whether his father had gone out of his mind.

He watched them enter the gates of Beechhurst Dene : saw the woman at the lodge come out, curtsy to her master and then to Geoffry : and John Clanwaring came to the conclusion that not only Sir Dene must be out of his mind, but a great part of the world beside him.

Little suspecting that condemning eyes were following them, Sir Dene and Geoffry continued their way to the house, turning off to the side entrance. John Clanwaring went on slowly to the front, gained the library, and rang an imperious peal for Gander.

"Did Sir Dene come in a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, sir," was the man's reply : "with Mr. Geoffry. They are hard at work with the papers in Sir Dene's parlour. Hill at the Lea Farm is gone in to them now."

From Gander's long service in the family, and the confidential terms he was on with the boys when they were young, they said anything to him, never attempting to be reticent.

"I wonder Sir Dene did not kick him out, rather than hand him into his parlour," quoth John Clanwaring, standing before the fire with his coat-tails under his arms, and speaking deliberately.

"Mr. Geoffry has come by appointment, sir," said Gander, who liked the younger brother ten times better than he did the elder. "At least, I take it to be so."

"And why do you 'take it' to be so?" scornfully asked the heir.

"Because Sir Dene said to me last night, 'Mind you have

a good fire early in my parlour, Gander ; Mr. Geoffry is coming up on business.' That's why, sir."

"Mr. Geoffry must have the impudence of Satan to volunteer a visit *here*," cried John Clanwaring, assuming such to have been the fact.

"Well, sir, it strikes me Sir Dene went and fetched him," returned Gander, confidentially, secretly rejoicing that he had it to say. "When Sir Dene got home last night, he told the groom that he and his horse had almost got lost in the mist, coming down the Link. So we took it that he must have been to Malvern."

Worse and worse. John Clanwaring signed impatiently for Gander to go, and then indulged his wrath alone. Let us give him his due : excepting on the score of the marriage, he had no ill-feeling against Geoffry ; but in his proud and haughty temper, he considered that act had brought an indelible stain on the family.

The morning wore on. Sir Dene and Geoffry remained in the parlour, very busy. At luncheon-time, Gander went to tell his master that it was ready.

Sir Dene rose ; and sat down again. How could he go to luncheon and not ask Geoffry ? And yet—to invite him to partake of a meal in the house would look as if his offence were quite condoned. And—here lay the obstacle—what would John say ?

"Oh, bother John—I can't help it," mentally cried Sir Dene, in his perplexity. "Will you come and have some lunch, Geoffry ? You must be peckish after your early ride."

"Thank you, sir," said Geoffry. And rose to follow him.

In the dining-room stood the heir. When he saw Geoffry enter with his father, just as it used to be, to sit down at the same table, one of themselves, he felt that it was a little more than he could stand. Geoffry went up to him, his kindly eyes looking straight into his brother's, as he held out his hand hesitatingly.

"You would not shake hands the last time we parted, John. Will you do so now ?"

"No," said John Clanwaring, in a voice low from concentrated passion. He was never loud, this young man ; but all the more firm and bitter,



"And yet, my father has—in a degree—forgiven me!"

"But that I see—what I see—with my own eyes, I had not believed Sir Dene would have lent his countenance to disgrace."

"Oh, hang it, John!" interposed Sir Dene, testily, not feeling very comfortable, and half ashamed of his own leniency. "Geoffry is the only one who can help me out of the confusion caused by Drew's departure. *You* would not try it, you know. Come, sit down."

"No, sir. Not with him."

"He is your brother, John."

"Unfortunately—yes. But I can never again regard him as one."

Mr. Clanwaring stalked deliberately out of the room, vouchsafing no further notice; ordering Gander, as he brushed by the man, to bring him something to the library.

"You see the difficulties I have to contend with, Geoffry," quietly remarked Sir Dene, when they sat down. "I can't do quite as I would."

"Yes, sir, I see," was the answer. "Be assured I will not intrude upon you unnecessarily, to add to them."

And so, Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife took up their abode in the bailiff's lodge. And the months went on.

## CHAPTER XI.

### IN THE SAME SPOT.

MR. AND MRS. OWEN were at supper in the ordinary living-room at Harebell Farm, taking it later than usual. It was Saturday, and Easter Eve. The farmer had been over to Worcester market. After his business was transacted, he had remained the evening with his daughter Mary and her husband, and invited them to spend Easter Day at the farm. Which made him late in reaching home.

"How does she look, Robert?" questioned Mrs. Owen, upon his saying that the invitation was declined.

"Mary? she is—I don't see that she looks very much better," was the cautious answer. Glancing at his wife from under his handsome eyelids, Robert Owen decided that she was too delicate just now to be unnecessarily troubled. The impulsive reply he had been about to utter was: "She is worse and weaker."

"And the baby?"

"Oh, that's strong enough. The pretty little thing can almost talk."

Mrs. Owen laughed slightly. "Why, she is only nine months old, Robert."

"Oh, well, she tries to talk. Girls are never backward in that matter. The child had its sleeves looped up with a row of pink coral beads, and gold clasps," continued Mr. Owen. "Squire Arde took them there this week, and said they had belonged to his own child when she was a baby."

"That is a curious thing for Squire Arde to do!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, after a pause. "One would say he had taken a fancy to the child."

"Oh, I don't know," said the less imaginative farmer. "He might have thought it was as well to put the beads to some use. Mary said that Geoffry Clanwaring and Maria have promised to go over for a day next week."

Supper over, Mary Barber came in for the tray. Joan, the hard-working household servant, was never kept up later than ten, excepting in cases of emergency. It was nearly eleven now. The farmer began looking about for his cap.

"Have you to go out again to-night, Robert?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"As far as the two-acre meadow; I must take a look at Lightfoot."

"Bugle is sure to have gone round there the last thing," she rejoined, in slight remonstrance.

"Not so sure, Bessie. He has been growing lazy lately—or careless. Was Cole up to-day, do you know?"

"Yes. Joan said she saw him in the yard with Bugle. You must be tired, Robert. I don't see that you need go out again."

"I shall do so," persisted the farmer, rather obstinately. "You had better go to bed, Bessie, as it's growing late."

"Then you will read now," said Mrs. Owen. For the day always ended at Harebell Farm with a chapter from the Bible and a short prayer. As Robert Owen took the book, his wife opened the parlour-door.

"Mary, will you come in to prayers?"

"I am busy, ma'am," came the reply from the kitchen.

"It will not take more than two or three minutes," said Mrs. Owen.

"It will take more time than I can spare, with all these things to clear away: and I can't leave them till morning," returned Mary Barber. "The master must read without me to-night, ma'am." And Mrs. Owen closed the door again.

He was going through the Gospels, and read the chapter at which he had left off the previous night—the eighth of St. Mark. Then he put on his great-coat; took his hat—not readily finding the cap he kept for night use—and went out.

It was a night late in March, almost April, but different from the night twelve months ago, when the two men in smock-frocks had stolen up Harebell Lane. That night had been bright and windy; this was still and misty. The moon ought to have been out to-night, but was not. Lightfoot, a favourite cow, was lying ill in the shed off the two-acre paddock; and Robert Owen had latterly had reason to doubt the attention of Bugle, his herdsman; hence his own visit. He reached the shed; found all tolerably right there, and turned his steps homewards again.

Ever since he had come out, his thoughts had been glancing back to the chapter he had read; now that his mind was at rest as to Lightfoot, he let them dwell altogether upon it.

"True," ran his reflections; "what shall it profit a man—though he gain the whole world, if he lose his own soul? Life here at best is but short: and Eternity lies beyond. Throughout our poor, brief lives, why don't we take better note of the lessons God gives us?"

Why Robert Owen himself should have taken "better note" lately, he could not have told. The fact was so. Without any apparent will of his, he had found his thoughts turned absolutely on serious things, and on the life to come. Three months ago, at the New Year, he had electrified his wife, and

astonished the parson, by remaining at church to take the Sacrament. For Robert Owen, like too many householders of the district—and of other districts also, for that matter—had not been in the habit of doing anything of this sort. They were content to leave this practical part of religion to the women and to the future. Perhaps it was the thought of his dying daughter—for that Mary Arde was gradually dying, lay on him with a firm and sure conviction—that brought these reflections home to him especially to-night. They had never been more vivid.

“Little Tom gone on, and Mary going : William and Maria left. Two in that world : two in this. Somehow, I feel as if I would as soon go myself as stay. If Bessie were only there—— Hallo ! Who’s abroad at this hour ?”

He was in the narrow pathway between the grove of trees and the fence, just above Harebell Pond, and the sound of footsteps and suppressed voices had struck upon his ear. As in that past night twelve months ago, so it was now. The two self-same men—or their exact counterpart—came stealing up the lane. They carried nothing in their hands, but by daylight their smock-frocks might have looked rather bulky. Just as Robert Owen had in that very spot watched them pass that other night, here he was again on this. It was a singular coincidence.

He stood his ground, leaning against the fence and looking at them as they came on. It was sufficiently light for him to be seen there, but the men passed on without speaking, apparently without looking.

“More underhand work at the Trailing Indian,” thought Robert Owen, as he pursued his way homewards. “I wish that affair—as to what Drew saw—was cleared up ! I don’t like it—and so I told Priar ; in spite of Mr. Randy Black’s glib explanation. However, it is no business of mine.”

The men—they were the same that had gone up on the former night : Michael Geach and Robson—arrived at the Trailing Indian in a state of fury. Even Geach, generally so careless and easy, had changed his tone of late, and become quite as savage as Robson in regard to what they considered was the espionage of the master of Harebell Farm.

"It's as true as I'm a living man!" he foamed, as they disencumbered themselves in the private room of sundry articles that were stowed about them. "In that old place, just above the pond, there he was, the devil!"

Black answered by some of his bad language.

"I'll tell ye what it is, mates," spoke up Robson, waking from a sudden reverie, and bringing his closed hand forcibly upon the table—"that man must have some means of getting at our movements. It's as sure as eggs is eggs."

"I have thought so some months past," acquiesced the landlord.

Geach, never very prone to suspicion, glanced from one to the other. He did not really understand. "What d'ye mean?" he asked.

"What do we mean?" retorted Robson. "Why, what should we mean? Owen has spies at work, and watches us according to the information they bring him in. Don't be a fool, Geach."

"I'm no more a fool than someone else is. How could Owen have spies at work?"

"I don't know how: he *has* them," retorted Robson. "Wasn't he stuck there to-night, waiting and watching for us? But for expecting us, would he ha' been out there at this hour? It don't stand to reason he would. None of his ewes are in th' mead now."

"Robson's right," spoke Black. "I've been almost sure of it since the night he watched the load away in the hearse. How could he have known anything was to be taken away that particular night, but for being informed of it? Would he have stopped at the stile watching our place till past midnight for nothing?"

A silence ensued, the three men looking at each other. If Mr. Owen really had spies at work, it very gravely affected their interests. Geach began to come round to their way of thinking.

"What possesses the man?—what does he do it for?" he asked, scarcely above his breath.

"Ah, what for!" echoed Black, sneeringly. "Why, to get me out of the Trailing Indian. Now that his girl has married

Sir Dene's son, of course Owen's got the young man's ear—'twas only him set the young fellow on me at the time you know of: pretty broad hints, too, he gave about the doings here! Owen is plotting to get us out of the place: nothing more nor less."

Robson rubbed the moisture from his startled face. "They might be down upon you at any time, Black. He might have come over that there night, folks helping him, and looked into the coffin. My patience! What on *earth* should we ha' done?"

"Have you heard much about that since?" resumed Geach. "More questions been asked?"

"Never one—though I've waited for 'em," replied Black. "Neither from Priar nor anybody else. They've got the tale round the place, though, and call it Randy Black's coffin. The mischief was, getting it away of a light night, you see; but who was to fear eyes in this lonely place at midnight? I wish Owen had been dead and buried before he had seen it!"

"But what's to be *done* with the man?" demanded Geach, his eyes blazing with anger. "We can't submit to be watched in this way; 'twould be destruction; and we shall want the hearse again soon."

"We'll hang him," said Robson, quietly, by way of answer. "'Twould be no sin," he added defiantly. "Hanging's the natural punishment of spies. And he's a spy, out and out."

Again the men looked at each other meaningly. Black broke the silence.

"He'd only get his deserts. Trust me for one thing: Owen shall be out of Harebell Farm before I'm out of the Trailing Indian."

Jonathan Drew's sight had not deceived him; the hearse had brought the coffin to the inn, deposited it inside the house, empty, and received it again, filled, two hours afterwards. This hearse was in the habit of making periodical visits to the Trailing Indian, always at the ghostly hours of night. But—to relieve the reader's feeling—it may as well be stated that it never took away a human being, living or dead. Had the coffin been charged and opened by Mr. Jonathan Drew that moonlight night, it would have been found to contain



nothing worse than closely packed layers of valuable lace, with some costly articles of jewellery wedged in between them.

It was a sure and safe way of transporting articles to London or elsewhere, which might not be sent in the broad light of day. Who would dream of suspecting a hearse, whether travelling along the highway by moonlight or sunlight ; or of searching the coffin within it ?

## CHAPTER XII.

### ON EASTER NIGHT.

THE bells of Hurst Leet Church wafted their sweet sound up to Harebell Farm in the stillness of the Sabbath morning. When the wind set this way, their chimes could be heard distinctly. The dense mist of the previous night—when Mr. Owen had walked to the two-acre meadow and seen the men stealing up Harebell Lane on their way to the Trailing Indian—had given place to a clear atmosphere. Generally speaking, Hurst Leet bells only gave out a brief ding-dong, to remind the world that it was Sunday ; to-day they were ringing. It was the custom of Hurst Leet Church at that period to administer the Sacrament four times in the year ; at Christmas and Easter ; at Midsummer and Michaelmas. On these occasions the bells rang for a few minutes at early morning. This was Easter Sunday.

Mary Barber was laying the cloth for breakfast when the bells broke out, and the sound caught her ear through the open window. Turning sharply round to look at the cuckoo-clock against the wall, she saw that it wanted ten minutes to eight.

“I was sure it was slow,” she exclaimed testily. “That clock’s always getting behind now.”

Robert Owen came downstairs, before the words had well left her lips, and entered the room. Never was the man’s singular beauty more remarkable than on a Sunday morning, when he was always dressed as a gentleman. He looked rather surprised not to see breakfast laid ; for the farm was

punctual in its habits, and sat down precisely at eight on a Sunday ; on week-days at seven.

"You are down to the minute, sir," was her greeting. "And I am late."

This was so unusual for Mary Barber, that Mr. Owen slightly lifted his eyebrows at the acknowledgment. "Your mistress is late also," he observed, "and will not be down for some minutes. She has had a bad night."

"What *I* did was to drop asleep when I ought to have been getting up," said Mary Barber. "I have had a bad night, too—in one sense—and have a great mind to tell you, sir, *why*."

Her manner was peculiar. Mr. Owen, who had gone to the open window and was listening to the bells, turned and looked at her.

"I have had an ugly dream, sir ; or rather two dreams, for I woke between them ; then went to sleep, and the dream went on again. It was about you, sir."

Mary Barber was superstitious in the matter of dreams. She did not have them often, but it must be confessed that two or three times in her life her dreams had appeared to foreshadow events that afterwards happened. When young, she had dreamed of the death of her father, and narrated the dream ; a few days after, his death, which was quite unexpected, took place.

Robert Owen smiled. One of the least superstitious of men, he would as soon have put faith in a ghost as a dream.

"Yes, sir," she said, the smile somewhat nettling her, "I know you'll ridicule all I say. But I think it better to say it, for all that. There's some ill in store for you, master ; so take care of yourself."

"Is it ghostly or bodily ill?" he rejoined. And Mary Barber did not like the mocking tone, good-natured though it was.

"Bodily, I should imagine," was the answer, as she rattled the tea-spoons into the saucers. "Listen to me while I tell you, sir ; then it will be off my conscience."

"You had better be quick about it, then, or you will have your mistress down," he said, resigning himself. "It may be as well not to relate unpleasant dreams to her."

She finished laying the cloth, and then stood in front of the table, facing him. Mr. Owen was at the open window still, listening to the bells.

"Sir, I thought in my sleep that it was the dawning of this very same Sunday. All here seemed to be in a deal of trouble ; and it was about you. You had to go somewhere : I don't know why or wherefore. It seemed to us that if you went, some awful ill would come to you ; we knew it would ; and yet there seemed no help for it ; never a thought crossed any one of us to say, 'Don't go.' It seemed just one of those things that *must be*. We were in great distress. Dreams are vivid, and I often think they have something of the future life about them, when we shall no longer see through a glass darkly. There never was such distress in this house, sir, as we seemed to be in then, and because you had to go away ; it was just anguish. We were all weeping bitterly."

"Whom do you mean by 'all'?" asked Robert Owen.

"I don't know. I think the mistress and the young lasses were here ; I know it was home ; this farm, these rooms ; and several of us stood about. The only face I clearly remember was Joan's, as she sat by the ironing-board in the kitchen, her hands clasped, and her eyes streaming. You alone seemed unconcerned, sir."

"Oh, I did, did I?"

"You were moving about amongst us ; I saw you more than once. But you seemed not to notice us, nor to feel any of the trouble that we felt. 'When's the master going?' I said to Joan ; and woke before she had time to answer."

"Is that all?" cried the master, far more absorbed by the sound of the bells he so loved, than by the narrative

"No, sir. I woke with the distress, as it seemed ; and thought to myself what a strange dream. Wondering what the time was, I got up and looked out of the window. Dawn was just glimmering, and the mist had cleared. I got into bed, dropped asleep, and was in the dream again. The same dream, sir, as though I had never wakened. Joan was still there, her eyes red with weeping, but you were gone, sir. The house seemed in the same awful distress. We all set off to search for you, but knew in our hearts that, search as we might,

you would never again return to us. Some went up the lane, some over the fields, and some hadn't got beyond the fold-yard ; but all were bearing for the same point, as it were ; and all were looking for you."

"Which point? The moon?"

"The Trailing Indian," she answered, too much absorbed in her tale to resent the remark. "I was one of those in the lane, and I awoke with the running. This clock was striking half after five ; and I sat up in bed, and asked myself what the dream could mean. I've hardly ever had one so life-like as that."

Mr. Owen made no answer.

"I lay wondering what it could mean. Then I went and called Joan, for 'twas time ; and after that I lay thinking again. Just as I ought to have got up, I dropped asleep ; and that has made me late, sir."

Mr. Owen, his ear bent to catch the last of the bells, made no reply.

"And I'm not able to say what it means, sir, though it has never for a minute been out of my thoughts since I got up. But it surely forebodes ill to you."

"The chimes are over," said Mr. Owen, as the vibration slowly died away on the air. "Mary, I wouldn't let a foolish dream disturb me, if I were you."

"I know that it makes just as much impression upon you, sir, as those chimes you are listening to," returned Mary Barber, tartly. "But I've told it you, and so far my conscience is at ease ; and I'd say further, take what care you can of yourself. That's all."

She left the room, brought in a dish of ham and eggs and placed it on the table. Mr. Owen had taken up his Prayer-book and was looking out the proper psalms for the Easter service.

"Sir, what ails Mr. George Arde and his wife, that they can't dine here on Easter Sunday?" resumed Mary Barber, in a different tone, for she had done with the dream subject. "Our chiscakes will be good enough for gentlefolks, I'll answer for it."

"It is not a question of cheesecakes," he answered, with a sigh. "Mary is not strong enough to come over. Unless

"I am mistaken, this is the last Easter she will see in this world."

"Perhaps if she'd made an effort, sir, she might have got here," suggested Mary Barber, in softer tones—for the answer somewhat appeased her resentment against things in general, and herself in particular for having dropped asleep when it was time to get up. "Our chiscakes are beautiful this Easter, and Miss Mary always was fond of them. Miss Maria never cared for them as Miss Mary did."

"We must send her some," returned Mr. Owen.

"Ay, sir. But I don't like to hear of her growing worse. At Christmas she looked like a drooping snowdrop. It was enough to lose Master Tom, without——"

"Hush! here comes your mistress," was the warning interruption.

Mrs. Owen entered, and not a word more was spoken on either of the subjects that master and maid had just then at heart; she, the dream; he, his daughter's failing health. Mrs. Owen was in too delicate a state herself to be troubled unnecessarily.

Again Robert Owen stayed to partake of the Sacrament after morning service, and again Mrs. Owen, who was in the habit of staying, and the parson equally wondered. Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife also stayed—for the first time together. Sir Dene was in his pew as usual; but gave himself no opportunity of speaking to Geoffry and Maria. He always came out of church when the congregation, including his son and daughter-in-law, had departed.

Things were going on quietly between Sir Dene and Geoffry. They met frequently on business matters, and Sir Dene seemed cordial; now and then he would say, "How's your wife, Geoff?" But Geoffry had not been invited to take a meal at Beechhurst since the luncheon, already alluded to; his visits were confined to business in Sir Dene's parlour. If any rare necessity brought Sir Dene to the bailiff's lodge, he would shake hands with Maria, and speak kindly.

Sir Dene was alone this Easter, John Clanwaring having sent a wordy excuse for not quitting London. The heir was engaged to be married now, and his ladye-love had claims on

his time. Geoffry, knowing all this, had wondered whether his father might open his heart and invite him and his wife to dinner. But nothing of the sort took place.

So Geoffry and his wife went up to dine at Harebell Farm, and remained there the rest of the day. Maria was grievously disappointed at not meeting her sister.

"Is Mary so much worse that she could not come, mamma?"

"I don't think it is exactly that," said Mrs. Owen. "She is weak and delicate, you know, Maria; but I suppose she could have come. George Arde has a bad cold, your father says; is almost laid up with it. They have a fresh nursemaid, too. Mary had to send away the other."

Yes, Mr. Owen, to his wife, had made any trivial excuse for their absence rather than state the truth about Mary Arde's fading life. And so the cheesecakes were eaten without her, and the day passed on to evening.

The bright night was very different from the previous one; it was almost as light as day. When Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife were leaving after supper, Mr. Owen put on his cap to walk part of the way with them.

"I should think that cap of yours will never wear out, papa," saucily observed Maria.

"It does not grow fresher," laughed Mr. Owen, "but it is good enough for a cold night's work, my dear."

This cap had been a standing jest with Robert Owen's daughters. It was of seal-skin, originally bought for travelling; and was in accordance with the taste of the day. A year or two ago, when it was growing worn and shabby, Mr. Owen had taken it into night use. One evening, in standing over the candle to read a letter, the front of it was woefully singed. Mary Barber, who would never see anything discarded that could possibly be used, edged it round with some white fleecy fur; rendering it more comfortable than before, but certainly not more ornamental; for it made one think of a magpie.

"Robert, won't you put on your greatcoat?" asked Mrs. Owen, as she followed them to the outer door.

"I think I will," he answered, turning back to take it from the peg. "The air is frosty."

She stood a minute at the door watching them down the



path, Maria arm-in-arm with her husband; Mr. Owen buttoning his coat, his favourite stick in his hand. A chill seemed to take her and run through her frame; she hastily closed the door and returned to the fire.

"Why are you shivering, ma'am?" questioned Mary Barber.

"It is cold at that open door," answered Mrs. Owen, stirring the fire. "I have felt a little shivery all the evening. This parlour is not half as warm as the other."

It was then ten o'clock. Mary Barber, busy in the kitchen, helping Joan to put things straight there, did not come in again for nearly an hour. Mrs. Owen had dropped into a doze over the fire, and woke up with a start.

"Dear me! I was asleep. What's the time, Mary?"

"Close upon eleven, ma'am."

"Eleven!" echoed Mrs. Owen. "Why, where can the master be? He must have gone all the way with them."

"It's a rare fine night," responded Mary Barber—as though tacitly implying that the fact might have tempted her master on.

Mrs. Owen put the Bible on the table to await her husband's return. Mary Barber sat down on the other side of the fire; and they waited on, talking of various things. Joan wanted a whole afternoon's holiday on the morrow—and a whole afternoon dated in Joan's vocabulary from one o'clock in the day. Mary Barber did not approve of Mrs. Owen's having consented to it; and said so. The cuckoo-clock struck half-past eleven.

"Why, where *can* he be?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen.

Wondering did not bring an answer. The time went on to twelve. Mrs. Owen was then in a state of great surprise, somewhat of alarm.

"Mary, do you think he can be staying all this time at Maria's?"

"Not unless he and Mr. Geoffry have got smoking a pipe together, ma'am. And that's not over-likely."

"But, even so, the master would not stay all this while."

The house was very still: nothing to be heard but the ticking of the cuckoo-clock, which came faintly through the open door of the other parlour. Joan was in bed and asleep, recruiting herself for the morrow's pleasure. Parkes, the man who slept indoors, had also retired. The clock ticked on for

another half-hour; and with every minute Mrs. Owen's uneasiness increased.

"Mary, it will soon be one o'clock," she said in nervous excitement. "It is not *possible* but that something must have happened! Perhaps he has fallen somewhere and hurt himself."

"The best thing, ma'am, for you to do, is to go to bed."

"Go to bed! Nonsense, Mary. I could not sleep if I did. You must call Parkes; and let him go out and look for his master."

"It will take more time and trouble to waken Parkes than to go myself," was Mary Barber's answer. "Once that man falls asleep, there's no rousing him till worktime in the morning. I'll go, ma'am."

If a thought crossed Mrs. Owen that she should feel lonely by herself, she suppressed it. Mary Barber was even then putting on her bonnet and warm cloak. Her mistress flung a shawl over her shoulders, and went with her to the corner of the house where she could see the fold-yard. They both listened for a minute, hoping to hear footsteps: but not a sound broke the night's stillness.

"Take the open road down Dene Hollow, Mary. That's the way he would come up: perhaps you may meet him."

Now, it is a fact, and one often mentioned by Mary Barber afterwards, that with the narration of her dream in the morning, it had gone out of her memory. What with preparing the good cheer deemed necessary for Easter Sunday, and the bustle it was to get to afternoon service herself, and to let Joan go out: in short, the general commotion: Mary Barber's mind had been fully occupied, and she had not once remembered her dream. As she passed through the gate into Harebell Lane, some night-bird flew with a cry across the trees higher up, its wings making a rush and whirr.

"That's an owl," thought Mary Barber, turning towards the sound, forgetting for the moment that owls flew silently. "I hate owls."

All at once, in that moment, as she stood gazing up the lane, her dream flashed into her memory. Just as it had been in the dream, so it was now in reality—Mr. Owen was missing

and being looked for. Only, in the dream many had been searching, and here it was only herself. So intensely did the fact—nay, the fear—come home to Mary Barber, that her arms dropped by her side as if they had been suddenly weighted.

With a certainty that no persuasion could have shaken, with a terror that seemed to stop the beating of her heart, with a shivering sensation that perhaps she had never but once in her life experienced, the conviction crossed her that it was in that upward direction she ought to search, not the other. And Mary Barber had all but started up the lane at full speed.

But, even with the most fanciful and superstitious, common sense must in a degree exert its sway. It told Mary Barber that there could be no motive in searching for her master in the opposite direction to that he had been bound for. There was absolutely nothing to take him up Harebell Lane, especially when he had been going the other way. But, had she started as impulse led her, it would have been the very exemplification of her dream, steering for what particular point she knew not, only that it was in the direction of the Trailing Indian.

"It's very odd," she sighed, as she turned the other way. "How came I to forget the dream all day long?—and why should it have come rushing over me as I looked up the lane at the cry of that bird? Was it the sight of the lane brought it back, I wonder? But what's stranger than all the rest, is the fact that the master should be missing as he was in the dream; and that I should have come out after him."

Very quickly she went on now. Under the park wall of Beechhurst Dene went she, turning off opposite its gates, down the new Dene Hollow road, so cold and white in the frosty moonlight. A few minutes brought her to Geoffry Clanwaring's humble residence.

That Mr. Owen was not lingering there, appeared pretty evident; the house was shut up, its upper curtains were drawn. By dint of knocking, Mary Barber succeeded in arousing Geoffry. He opened his window, and looked out.

"Is the master here, sir?" asked Mary, standing back against the shrubs to look up.

"Is that you, Mary Barber?" he exclaimed. "Your master? No, he is not here. What made you think he was?"

"Didn't he come here, sir, with you and Miss Maria?"

"No. He came as far as the new road; and then turned back. He said he was going to look at a sick cow; Lightfoot, I think he called it."

Maria's head appeared beside her husband's shoulder. A thought had struck her.

"Is mamma taken ill, Mary?"

"Not she," replied Mary Barber. "Why should you think that, Miss Maria?" For Mary found it difficult to discard the familiar form of years, and rarely gave the young lady her new matronly title.

"Then why should you have come after papa? What is the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter, except that he has not arrived home."

"Is that all?" returned Maria, carelessly: and neither she nor her husband, suddenly aroused from sleep, appeared to have any idea that it was so late. "Then why need you have come here?" repeated Mrs. Clanwaring.

Mary Barber possessed a large share of prudence. It occurred to her that she need not further alarm this young girl by stating what she feared. "We got wondering where the master could be, Miss Maria—and your mamma wanted to go to bed," she said. "That's why I came."

"Well, I hope you have liked your walk—and you've given me a fright besides. Good-night, Mary; I wish you a pleasant ramble back again."

"Mr. Owen is sure to have been with Lightfoot," added Geoffry. "You will find him at home when you get there. Good-night."

He closed the window; and Mary Barber turned slowly away, her heart ten times heavier than before. Had Lightfoot been dead or dying, he would not have stayed with the animal all that time. An awful prevision lay on Mary Barber that her master was dead.

It had been calm and still as she went down, but now a breeze had arisen; stirring gently the branches of the trees, passing through them with a slight sighing sound. The shadows played upon the white road up Dene Hollow; Mary Barber

thought of that other shadow her mother had professed to see, and shivered a little as she passed the spot. What with the remembrances attaching to the road, and this present midnight dread, things looked a little ghostly.

A quick, firm step on the upper path. Mary Barber heard it, and her heart leaped with hope. But it proved to be only Mr. Priar. They met at the corner opposite Sir Dene's lodge, and the surgeon looked thunderstruck at seeing her.

"Why, Mary Barber! What brings you abroad at this ghostly hour?"

A brief mutual explanation ensued. Mr. Priar was on his way from the Trailing Indian, to which inn he had been summoned in desperate haste some few hours before.

"What for?" demanded Mary Barber. "Who's ill?"

He told her who—as well as his knowledge of the facts served him. That afternoon a comely young woman, footsore with walking, made her unexpected appearance at the inn-door, in search of Mr. Michael Geach, whose wife she announced herself to be. Geach went into a towering passion, abused her for coming, and ordered her away again. She refused to go; and a general quarrel ensued. What with the fatigue, and the excitement of the quarrel, the young woman was taken ill. Her symptoms grew serious; Mr. Priar was sent for, and arrived in time to usher an infant into the world.

"Well, I'm sure!" cried Mary Barber, when she had listened to the story. "Geach?—Geach?—I've heard that name before now."

"He is an acquaintance of Black's," said Mr. Priar. "Some loose fellow, who appears by fits and starts at the Trailing Indian."

"Is the young woman his wife?"

Mr. Priar drew in his lips. "If required to produce her marriage 'lines,' I fancy she might have some difficulty in doing it," said he. "Black turned virtuous over it, I hear, and is annoyed that she should be laid up there. She is very ill, poor thing."

"Did you see my master at the Trailing Indian?" resumed Mary Barber. "Or in the lane as you came through it?"

"No. I should hardly be likely to see him at the Trailing

Indian. As to the lane, it seemed more lonely than ever to-night, as if not a soul had been near it for ages."

He was about to pass on, naturally wanting to get home to rest. Mary Barber put out her hand to detain him.

"James Priar"—she had called him so before in solemn moments: and this seemed one of the most solemn she had ever passed—"there's a feeling upon me that some great ill has happened to the master. I believe him to be dead."

"Dead! Mr. Owen?"

Standing in the moonlight, Mary Barber disclosed her reason for saying this, and related her dream, regardless of Mr. Priar's stare. As she went on, speaking very earnestly, incredulous surprise gave place to something very like concern. Perhaps he was somewhat superstitious himself.

"*That's* why I asked you, whether you had seen him up there. Because in the dream we seemed to know it was the right place to search for him—somewhere toward the Trailing Indian."

"I've neither seen sign nor heard news of him," was the answer. "If Geoffry Clanwaring tells you he was going to see the sick cow, no doubt he went there."

"But he wouldn't stay in the cowshed all this time."

"You don't know. Possibly, he found the animal worse, and may have gone after Cole the farrier. It isn't unlikely."

This idea had not occurred to Mary Barber. It was certainly possible.

"Yes, yes!" said the surgeon, hastily. "For goodness' sake don't let your mind run on those other dismal thoughts. You'll find him all right when you reach home again."

She slowly shook her head, in spite of the faint hope that arose within her; and they parted. "I might think it," she said, "but for my dream. And those morning dreams come true."



## CHAPTER XIII.

## AT THE TRAILING INDIAN.

"HAS he come home, ma'am?" was Mary Barber's first question, as she entered the farm. And Mrs. Owen went up to her as though glad to find herself again in companionship. The past hour had been more than solitary.

Robert Owen had not returned. There were no tidings of him within, any more than without. Mary Barber mentioned the suggestion offered by Mr. Priar.

"There's nothing in it, ma'am, as I believe," she said. "But I'll rouse up Parkes, and make him go with me to the shed. If we see nothing of the master, we'll come back and go down the hill to Cole's."

After a great amount of trouble, Mr. Parkes, a thick-headed rustic of twenty, was aroused, and he and Mary Barber started off across the fields. The night was so light that they could clearly distinguish every feature of the way; almost every blade of grass.

"I see the master to-night going on to the shed," suddenly cried Parkes, keeping a few steps behind Mary Barber.

She turned upon him. "You saw the master going on to the shed!" she repeated. "What do you mean by that, Parkes?"

He proceeded to explain. Parkes had spent the afternoon at his mother's—who lived two or three miles away, on the high-road that crossed the upper end of the lane near the Trailing Indian—and came back later than he ought to have come. Jumping over the stile opposite the inn, he crossed the first field to the two-acre meadow. There he suddenly saw his master come round the narrow path between the fence and the grove, just above Harebell Pond. Not caring to be seen—for the rule was that he should be at home earlier—Parkes sheltered under the hedge, saw the master strike across the field towards the cowshed, and then sped onwards.

"What time was this?" questioned Mary Barber, when she had heard the confession.

"Blest if I can tell a'zackly," replied the young man. "I know 'twere a sight a'ter ten."

Therefore it appeared certain, from this testimony, that Mr. Owen, after parting with Geoffry Clanwaring and Maria, had gone straight on to the cowshed, through his fields. "But you must have been a fool, not to show yourself and bear him company, as you were there, Parkes," cried Mary Barber, who liked nothing better in life than keeping the youth in order.

They passed round the narrow path, so often mentioned, between the grove and the fence—Mr. Parkes taking a temporary recreation by catching up a clod of earth and dropping it over into Harebell Pond. It was the nearest way into the two-acre meadow, cutting off the width of a wide field.

The shed was there, and the cow was there, all safe and comfortable; but Robert Owen was not. No sign, even, was seen to betray that he had been there: but of course such sign was not to be expected.

"Let us go and have a look at the Trailing Indian," cried Mary Barber.

Parkes tramped after her, over the stile, and across the field to the other stile, opposite the Trailing Indian. The house lay still and quiet in the moonbeams; closely shut up; there was not so much as a light visible to indicate the chamber of the sick woman told of by Mr. Priar.

"We'll take the way of the lane back," said Mary Barber, "and go on straight to Cole's."

It was just possible her master might have fallen somewhere, she thought; might be lying still, and so escape the eyes of Mr. Priar, who had said the lane was empty. She kept her own wide open, looking well to the banks on either side; and looking in vain. Parkes flung another clod into the pond as he passed it, stirring up its green and slimy waters. It took more time to knock up the farrier than it had Geoffry Clanwaring. But the man had not seen Mr. Owen.

A more miserable morn than that dawning on Harebell Farm could not be imagined. Do what she would, bring any amount of sober reasoning to bear against the impression, Mary Barber was unable to divest herself of the conviction

that some untoward fate had overtaken her master, or of the notion that the Trailing Indian and its inmates had something to do with his disappearance. She started off for the inn as early as she thought it would be astir, her footsteps brushing the dew from the grass. The side-door of the house was open; she entered without knocking, and went on to the kitchen. The kettle was singing on the sway over the fire; and Mrs. Black, kneeling before the hearth, was raking the dust from the cinders into the purgatory. A teapot and caddy stood on the table.

"Where's my master?" sharply demanded Mary Barber.

Mrs. Black started up as though she had been shot. By the hue her face changed to, certainly telling of terror, Mary thought the woman must be mistaking her for an apparition. There was a minute's silence.

"Who did you ask for, please?" then questioned Mrs. Black, in her meek way.

"I asked for my master: Mr. Owen, of Harebell Farm. That's what I've come about."

"But I don't know anything of him," returned the woman, after a pause, and in what appeared to be genuine surprise. "He is not here."

"Didn't he come here last night—say at half-past ten, or so?" pursued Mary Barber, hazarding the question.

"Not that I know of. I think the house was shut up before that."

"He went to the two-acre meadow about that time, to see a sick cow. We think that he may have come on here: perhaps for something or other that he wanted."

The landlady shook her head, as if hardly understanding. "I'll ask the ostler, if you like," she said. "I wasn't about here last night myself: we've a sick woman upstairs."

"I feel as sure in my heart that the master came on here as though I'd seen him come, Mrs. Black."

"Well, he might, of course," admitted Mrs. Black, after a pause of apparent consideration. "I can't say: but Joe'll be here in a minute or two."

Mary Barber sat down without being asked. Mrs. Black disposed of her cinders, and pushed the fender into its place.

"Where's Black?" was Mary Barber's next curt question.

"He's not up yet," replied the landlady. "As for me, I've not been to bed."

Mary understood the reason—she had sat up with the sick woman. "I heard of it," she said. "How is the person?"

"Well, she's bad enough."

A short silence ensued. Mary Barber seemed impatient; the landlady stood waiting for the kettle to boil, and took occasional glances at her visitor.

"But I don't understand why you've come asking about this," she suddenly observed. "Why should you think Mr. Owen came to the inn?"

"We don't know what to think. He has never been home since the time he went out last night."

Mrs. Black looked up in surprise.

"Since the time he went to that cowshed last night, he has never been seen or heard of. My belief is that he has been made away with."

The woman was in the act of putting a spoonful of tea into the teapot, as Mary Barber said this. The words seemed to affect her strangely. Her hands shook so that the tea was spilled; her face again turned livid.

"What do you mean?" escaped from her trembling lips.

"What I say," sturdily replied Mary Barber. "We have been out all night looking for the master, and he's not to be found above ground. I fear he has been murdered."

"Mercy upon us?" cried the woman, aghast.

It was evident that if the Trailing Indian—according to Mary Barber's theory—knew anything of Robert Owen's disappearance, its mistress did not. Gathering up the spilt tea from the table and putting it into the teapot with her trembling fingers, she was in the act of lifting the kettle off the sway, when the ostler appeared, carrying a bucket of water from the well.

"This good lady's come round to know if Mr. Owen at the farm called in here last night," she meekly said, speaking rapidly. And the man gazed at her with questioning eyes—surprised perhaps, at her white lips.

"Owen of the farm don't never come here," he briefly replied,

"I think he must have come last night," interposed Mary Barber, addressing the ostler. "We've not heard or seen him since; he never came home."

"He never came here," said the man, stooping to pour the water into a small cistern. "What time was't?"

"Nigh upon half-after ten. Maybe quite that."

"And we was shut up afore ten struck."

"That you were not," retorted Mary Barber. "Dr. Priar never went away till one o'clock in the morning."

"The house was shut up afore ten; that I'll swear to," asserted the man. "When Dr. Priar was ready to leave, I unlocked the yard-door and let him out myself."

"I told the good lady I thought we was shut up early," spoke the hostess, who had kept her back turned, doing something at the fire.

"We had no callers o' no sort i' the place last night," resumed the ostler, taking up the other bucket. "As to Owen of Harebell Farm, he warn't in the habit of coming at all. If he'd been here last night, I should ha' seen him."

"Be you sure o' that?" asked Mary Barber.

"I be. I'll take my oath he was not anigh the place."

Mary Barber paused. "Was Black abroad last night?"

"No," replied the ostler, "he never went out at all. He was abed afore we shut up."

Apparently there was nothing to stay for. Mary Barber said good-morning and went away, feeling that her errand had been fruitless.

Ere the sun was high in the heavens, the news had spread far and wide: Robert Owen of Harebell Farm had mysteriously disappeared. Hurst Leet went into commotion. The mere fact of his disappearance might not have excited a tenth part of the interest, but for Mary Barber's persistent assertion that he had been, in some way, "made away with."

The testimony of Parkes, as to having seen his master on the previous night was negatively confirmed by two individuals. Joan said that when Parkes arrived home he told her he had nearly been "dropped upon" by the master in the two-acre meadow. The other was Sir Dene's butler. Gander, returning home soon after ten from taking a glass of ale with Cole the

farrier, overtook Mr. Owen at the entrance to Harebell Lane, wished him good-night, and saw him turn in at his own gate. Therefore, no doubt could rest on any mind that the farmer had proceeded to the shed on quitting his daughter and her husband. The question now was what had become of him afterwards.

Harebell Farm that day was like a fair, so many sympathizing friends and neighbours flocked up to it. George Arde, who had come over from Worcester on other matters, found it in this commotion. Geoffry Clanwaring was there; also old Squire Arde. Mary Barber got these three to herself in the best parlour, and there related her dream. The once keen eyes of Squire Arde, watery now, twinkled with merriment as he listened.

"Mary woman, I wouldn't set myself up for a laughing-stock if I was in your place; the parish might be taking you for a born natural. Dreams, indeed!"

But in spite of the old man's ridicule, Mary Barber never wavered in her belief. Her master was dead, she maintained: dead, or in sore straits that would prevent his ever coming back to them; she was certain he had seen his home for the last time.

Though not given to superstition, her steadfast assertion and earnestness made an impression upon the two listeners who had the largest interest in the matter: George Arde and Geoffry Clanwaring. They grew to think that he really might be dead. And then they asked themselves and each other, how—if this were so—his death had been accomplished. By accident, or by assault from without?

"See here," said Squire Arde, looking up from the chair where he sat—"almost as many accidents happen on a moonlight night as a dark one. People's eyes get deceived by the shadows. I should have the ponds dragged."

"What ponds, sir?" said George.

"What ponds? Why, any pond that lay in his way. There's the one by the fold-yard here, the duck-pond; and there's the pond in the lane. Have 'em emptied—or dragged."

"Do you think he could have fallen in, sir?" returned George Arde, in tones that would have been sarcastic, but that he was speaking to the Squire.



"I think he might have walked in," was the answer. "Yes, you young men with your young eyes may stare to hear me say so ; but if you live to Robert Owen's age, you may find 'em cheating you sometimes. Did you ever hear of one Squire Honeythorn, who lived at Beechhurst Dene?" he quaintly asked. And they smiled at the question.

"Well, one moonlight night, Honeythorn, in walking home down Harebell Lane, walked right into the pond. He hadn't had a drop of drink ; don't you two go thinking that ; but he was getting in years and the shadows deceived him. I know a lady, too, who walked right into the Worcester-and-Birmingham canal, and thought it was part o' the towing-path. She was hardly saved, either ; some boatmen heard her cries as she was sinking. It might have gone hard with Honeythorn, only a horseman happened to ride down the lane at the time. And that was me."

"If Mr. Owen walked into a pond, it must be the duck-pond here," said George Arde. "He did not go into Harebell Lane."

"How do you know that?" retorted the Squire.

"We don't any of us *know*, sir ; but we may judge by probabilities."

"I'd recommend you not to speak so positively, young man. 'Probabilities' have deceived older folks than you before now."

"Well, sir, do you yourself see any likelihood of his having gone into the lane?"

"No, I don't," candidly spoke Squire Arde. "I only say he might ha' gone. But there ; let Harebell Pond stand over. Try this one."

"I do not fear the ponds," interposed Geoffry Clanwaring, who had been buried deep in a reverie. "Knowing the ground as Mr. Owen knew it, a bright night besides, it seems next door to impossible that harm of that sort should come to him."

"Master would no more walk into a pond, whether by daylight or moonlight, than I should walk into the middle o' that fire," cried Mary Barber. "Squire Arde, it's not *there* we must look for him."

"Where then?" asked the Squire, noting the significant tone.

"I think—I think," she slowly rejoined, "it's up at the Trailing Indian. There has been a deal of ill-feeling on Black's part to the master ever since we came to this farm: and I say that if harm has been done to him, it's by the inn people."

— That Black had accused Robert Owen of spying upon him, they were all aware of. The neighbourhood knew as much as that. Also that Mr. Owen had emphatically denied any intentional spying on his own part. He had not sought out ill-doings at the Trailing Indian: only, when they, or a suspicion, had come under his notice incidentally, he had not closed his eyes to them. That was all.

Squire Arde administered a reproof. "Mary Barber, there might have been ill-feeling on Randy Black's part towards your master; likely enough. But you shouldn't say the man has murdered him."

"I didn't say it, Squire. I didn't speak as plainly as that, whatever my thoughts may be. Truth is, I don't know what to think," she continued; "my brain's quite muddled over it. If no harm has come to the master, where *is* he? I should like to ask Black whether he's alive or dead. When I was up at the Trailing Indian this morning, I couldn't get to see him."

Every little item connected with the past night bore its own interest. Geoffry Clanwaring mentioned that as he and his wife were walking home, Mr. Owen told them he had seen two suspicious-looking men stealing up Harebell Lane on the Saturday night, no doubt on their way to the Trailing Indian. Geoffry could have added, had George Arde not been present, that Mr. Owen changed the subject to speak of his daughter Mary—saying he did not think she would be long in this world.

"'Twould do no harm if some of us went up and had a talk with Black," said Squire Arde. "A sight of trampers and such-like ill-looking folk have been about lately. If any of them set upon Farmer Owen last night in the two-acre meadow, sounds of it might have been heard at the Trailing Indian. They've a habit of creeping into sheds to sleep, those tramps: maybe, Owen found some in his. Let's go."

Nothing loth were the two young men to accompany him to the inn, and they took their hats at once. In the fold-yard stood Gander. Geoffry Clanwaring stopped to accost him.

"You saw Mr. Owen last night, I hear, Gander?"

"Yes, sir; I overtook him i' the lane yonder, as he was turning in at the gate here."

"What passed?"

"Nothing to speak of," was Gander's answer. "I said 'Good-night, sir,' to him, and he answered 'Good-night' back again. That was all, Mr. Geoffry."

"You did not hear anything of him afterwards?"

"No, sir; nothing."

"Or see any strange men about?"

"Not a soul, sir."

Black stood in his yard, rubbing up the metal of some harness, when they reached the inn. It may as well be mentioned here what was learned, partly from the man's own admissions, partly from the corroboration of others, of the doings on the Sunday at the Trailing Indian.

In the course of the morning, whilst people were in church, the man named Robson took his departure from the inn, he and Geach having lodged there on the Saturday night. Dinner was served at two o'clock. Black and Geach sat down to it, and Mrs. Black waited on them. The meal was just over, when a young woman arrived, asked for Michael Geach, and announced herself as his wife. Geach, astounded at the sight, met her with abuse and anger; whilst Black, who had not before known of a Mrs. Geach, abused Geach for allowing her to come there; or, rather, for allowing it to be known, by her or any one else, that he might be found at the Trailing Indian. Both men had imbibed plentifully of strong ale at dinner; it inflamed their tempers, and they quarrelled with each other. Quarrelling is thirsty work; and the men found it so. Passing from ale to spirits, they were soon in a state of intoxication. During this time Mrs. Geach fell ill, and was unable to depart, as ordered. What with that fresh annoyance, the quarrel and the spirits, Geach's fury reached its climax. He went off in a passion, mounted a public conveyance that happened to be passing along the highway, and left Mrs. Geach to her fate and the hospitality of the Trailing Indian. That was about five o'clock. Black, after swearing a little at things in general, sat down in the settle before the fire in what was called the parlour,

and fell into a heavy sleep. He said that he never awoke until the ostler was shutting up the inn for the night, just before ten; and then he went straight up to bed. The ostler bore this out, so did Mrs. Black. Before this, the sick woman grew so ill that Mrs. Black became alarmed, and about eight o'clock despatched the ostler for Mr. Priar. All agreed on these two important points—that Robert Owen had not been to the inn; and that none of the inmates of the inn had gone forth at all that evening, excepting the ostler on his errand. He, the ostler, returned with Mr. Priar, and did not quit it again. If this statement could be verified, it was certain that Black could have had nothing to do with the disappearance.

He nodded civilly enough to the three gentlemen when they entered the yard, but kept on at his harness, looking frightfully ill and sallow, the effects probably of intemperance. Not often did Black yield to the failing; when he did, it was sure to pay him off the next day with a racking sick head-ache.

"Well, Black," began Squire Arde, "we've come up to have a word or two with you. Do you know anything of Mr. Owen?"

Black grew suddenly whiter with an accession of head-ache or anger. He let the strap fall from his hand.

"What I'd like to know, sir, is why I should be asked this. I'm free to put that question, I suppose," he added, his voice trembling with what seemed suppressed passion. Folks have been coming up every hour o' the day since early morning, asking me what I've done with Robert Owen. That woman of theirs was here before the house-door was unbarred. Why should I be bothered about Owen, more than others?"

"For one thing, you are his nearest neighbour, Black," was the Squire's answer. "For another, the last seen or known of Owen was in the two-acre mead over there, within a stone's throw of you."

"There might be two hundred Owens over in that mead, and me never know it," contended Black.

"Mr. Owen was there—it has just been ascertained—at about a quarter-past ten last night, or from that to half-past," sternly interposed Geoffry Clanwaring. "He has not been seen since. Do you know anything about him, Black?"

"No, I don't, sir," replied Black, speaking with tolerable civility to his landlord's son. "Long before that time I was in bed. Fact was, I took a drop too much yesterday afternoon—and my head's splitting to-day," he added, as if in apology for his dissipated appearance. "I fell asleep in the parlour and never woke or stirred till bedtime. Joe disturbed me, putting-to the shutters, and I went straight up to bed."

"What time was that?"

"What time?" repeated Black. "Joe knows more sure than I do," he added. "'Twasn't ten."

"It wanted ten minutes o' ten," interposed Joe, who was splashing away at the horse-trough close by. "We don't often shut up till ten; but there were no customers in the house, nor none likely to come, and I thought I'd close. The master swore at me, saying it warn't time; he was cross at being woke up."

"And you swore at him again, I suppose?" remarked Squire Arde.

"No, I didn't," replied the ostler, in his stolid way. "When a man's in his cups, he's best let alone. He didn't give no opportunity for it, neither, but stumped right off to bed."

"What strikes me is this, Black," said the Squire—who appeared to have forgotten that there was any suspicion against Black. "There's a lot of ill-doing tramps about; always is after a hard winter; if any of 'em had crept into the cowshed, and Owen found 'em there, he and they might have a row together."

"I've never known so many tramps about as now," returned Black, hastily and eagerly. "Two bad 'uns were at the door on Sunday morning, frightening the missis, and begging scraps o' bread. They just looked like cut-throats."

"Ay," nodded the Squire. "Who knows but those same two lay up somewhere about here till night, and attacked Robert Owen? You might have heard the sounds over here, Black."

"I wasn't likely to hear anything," answered Black. "I fell asleep the minute I got into bed: and when I'm in that stupid state I sleep heavier than a top."

At this juncture Mr. Priar appeared at the side-door, having

come downstairs from paying a visit to the sick woman. They remained a few minutes longer talking, Black steadily persisting that he had neither heard nor seen anything of Mr. Owen; and then they all, including the doctor, turned to depart.

There's an old and excellent saying—Let well alone. Black did not allow it to govern him just then. Like many another zealous self-defender, he thought the more words used, the better his cause might be served.

"I've not had an answer to my question, gentlefolk," he began, arresting them as they were going out. "What I'd like to know is, if there's any reason for *my* being singled out to be badgered about Mr. Owen—what's become of him, or what hasn't?"

Upon that, George Arde, who had been silent hitherto, contenting himself with looking and listening, turned to the man, and told him of the ill-feeling he was known to have cherished towards Mr. Owen. He spoke with open, rather stinging plainness, of the suspected ways of the Trailing Indian: not specializing their nature—perhaps he could not do so—but alluding to them in a general way, as "ill-doings."

This roused Black's temper. He was under no obligation to Mr. George Arde, or to his relative at his side, the Squire; and he retorted warmly.

"Well, he had had reason to feel bitter against Mr. Owen: though he had never molested him—nor thought of doing it—nor ever had done it. He had his own feelings, though he was but an innkeeper, and the farmer would never let him alone. Owen watched him continually; was a spy upon him—talked about him at Hurst Leet. *No!* say the gentlemen before him. *No?* One of them at least knew better than that. Look at the lies about the hearse which stopped to bait at his house that winter night. Farmer Owen had set it about that it had come to take away a corpse, and had sent Dr. Priar up to accuse him of it. If——"

Mr. Priar lifted his hand to command silence. "Don't be so fast, Black. Who told you Mr. Owen sent me?"

"Why, you did," retorted Black—whilst the ostler stopped his splashing to listen. "You confessed that the man stood at



that stile, over there, and watched the hearse away? You know you did, sir."

"I did not," said Mr. Priar. "I told you that the person was not watching purposely, but saw it incidentally in passing; I impressed this upon you as plainly as I could speak. And I most certainly never told you the person was Mr. Owen."

"I knew *that* without you telling me, Dr. Priar. There was no need to mention names—oh dear, no."

"But it was not Mr. Owen."

"Not Mr. Owen! It's all very well for you to try to make me believe that now, sir," added Black sneeringly.

"I tell you, Black, it was *not* Mr. Owen. The person who saw you was Jonathan Drew—now lying disabled, poor man. In riding past, he saw the hearse at the open door here, and drew up Dobbin by the stile to watch what came of it."

"I can testify to its being Drew," interrupted Squire Arde, "for he gave me the history of it the next day from his bed. He talked about the hearse, and all he had seen brought out of the yard-door here, and shut into it. Don't give your betters the lie to their faces, Black."

Black did not speak, but looked from the curious old man to the doctor, silently asking whether this were really true. So, at least, Mr. Priar interpreted it.

"You need not doubt me, Black," said the surgeon. "It was in galloping away from the hearse, down Dene Hollow, that Drew's horse threw him—and I wondered at the time that your own common sense did not tell you it could have been no one but Drew, knowing, as you did, that he must have just ridden past here. The first thing Drew did when I got him home that night was to tell me what he had seen. He concluded it was your wife who was put into the hearse; so did I. And that's what brought me up the following morning."

Black's lips parted to speak, and then closed again. In some way or other the narrative was evidently making a great impression on him.

"Drew was mistaken," he brought forth at length. "He never saw it; he couldn't ha' seen what was never there. The hearse only stopped to bait; 'twas never opened."

"It is of no consequence now, one way or the other ; the thing's past and done with," coolly rejoined Mr. Priar. "Only don't continue to fancy it was Mr. Owen ; he saw no more of the matter than I did. As it happens, I am in a position to testify that Mr. Owen never went out of his house that night. I was up there, you remember, and we were all in trouble about the child. Mr. George Arde can bear out what I say ; he was at the farm also."

George Arde nodded in confirmation.

"Ay, ay," wound up the Squire. "Don't be fond of taking up wrong notions, Black, and then sticking to 'em in the teeth of people."

Without further remark they quitted the yard. Black drew a long breath as he looked after them. "You can finish the harness, Joe," he said to the ostler, and went indoors.

As they crossed the lane and the opposite stile, Mr. Priar related what had come under his own cognizance the previous evening. It was past eight o'clock, he said, when the ostler, Joe, came 'to fetch him ; they both went back to the Trailing Indian, reaching it about nine. Black was fast asleep in the corner of the settle, and Joe remarked that his master was "sleeping off some of the drink." About a quarter before ten Mr. Priar went downstairs for something he wanted ; Black was then still asleep in the same place and position, and Joe was sitting by the kitchen fire. In a minute or two Mr. Priar went up again, and did not see Black again. It was quite possible the man might have gone up to bed before ten, as he asserted ; Mr. Priar could not say one way or the other, for he was shut up with Mrs. Black in the sick woman's chamber. He did not think the ostler went out again ; they had occasion to call two or three times for hot water and other things, and the man was always at hand to bring them up. When Mr. Priar came down to leave, an hour after midnight, the ostler was waiting up in the kitchen to let him out. Mr. Priar took half a glass of hot brandy-and-water before going out, which Joe mixed. He stood by the kitchen fire and talked to Joe whilst he drank it ; and he remembered that the man incidentally mentioned that his master had gone to bed before ten.

All this tended to corroborate Black's own statement ; it

certainly appeared that he could not have harmed, or helped to harm, Robert Owen. In passing the shed, they turned into it; for curiosity's sake, more than in expectation of making any discovery. Lightfoot, recovering fast, was there, and turned her head to welcome them; but there was no sign that any struggle had taken place in it. In fact, the undisturbed litter testified to the contrary.

"Whatever happened, must have happened after he had paid his visit here," remarked Geoffry Clanwaring, as they went out. "Parkes saw him making straight for the shed; had he been molested before reaching it, the man could not well have failed to hear the cries. The door was found fastened too, just as Mr. Owen would leave it. Now then—let us see. He would naturally go straight home again, knowing Mrs. Owen was waiting up. That would be across here"—stretching out his hand to the two-acre meadow, which lay green and smooth before them as they walked—"round the narrow path, and so across the fields home. It's a pity the sheep are on the other side of the farm this year," he added; "had they been here the shepherd might have been about."

Crossing the stile to the pathway, they traversed it slowly. It was very narrow indeed; the low fence lay on their right. In length it might have been twenty yards, not more; and in the middle of it Squire Arde stopped and looked over at the pond in the lane underneath.

"Ah," said he, "if Owen had been going through the lane instead of up here, I should say he had mistaken his way amid those rushes, and walked into the pond."

"But don't you think, sir, even had such a thing happened, that he would have been able to get out again?" spoke Geoffry Clanwaring.

"Like enough: some might and others mightn't," answered the old man. "What's this?"

He had his back against the fence now, glancing at the brushwood that grew amongst the trees immediately in front of where he stood. It appeared to be a little disturbed.

"One might almost fancy that some one has made a dash through it just here. What d'ye think?"

The other three, glancing to where the old man pointed,

did not appear to think much of it. "Some animal, perhaps," one of them carelessly answered.

"I suppose we must give up suspecting Black," remarked Geoffry Clanwaring, as they went on over the open field. "His account seems fair enough, and likely to be true."

"Ay, I don't doubt him in this, for my part," acquiesced the Squire.

"Neither do I," said Mr. Priar.

"I don't altogether doubt him; but I don't altogether trust him," dissented George Arde. "Whilst you were talking to him, I was watching him. There was one thing I did not like—his enlarging on the state he was in yesterday. It is not considered a great crime to get drunk in these days; nevertheless, most men in Black's position would rather hide the fact from their betters than gratuitously proclaim it. I wondered whether he had any motive for wishing us to believe that he *was* drunk. Another thing: he never, whilst he spoke, looked one of us in the face throughout the whole interview."

Squire Arde, deep in his own thoughts, had not been listening. "Who didn't?" he asked, waking up.

"Who, sir!" returned George Arde, in surprise. "I was speaking of Randy Black."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### HAREBELL POND.

THE singular disappearance of Robert Owen excited more speculation and comment than anything that had occurred in the neighbourhood of late years. Razing widow Barber's home, the stolen marriage of Sir Dene's son, both of note at the time of their occurrence, did not excite the prolonged commotion caused by this disappearance. As the days went on and brought no tidings the painful interest increased. He was not a man likely to have gone away of his own accord; and yet he could not be heard of in the neighbourhood. Mary

Barber's opinion, that he had been murdered, spread silently but surely.

The duck-pond near the fold-yard was searched, and yielded nothing but mud. In returning home from his visit to the shed—if he did return—Mr. Owen might pass this pond. The probability was that he would do so, though he could have gone round on the other side of the barn. Harebell Pond was not disturbed; it was universally assumed that nothing would be likely to take Mr. Owen into the lane. To return home that way, after leaving the shed, he must have traversed the outer field, crossed the stile opposite the Trailing Indian, and thence through the whole of the lane—a round for nothing. So the pond was not meddled with.

The feeling against the Trailing Indian died away. Mary Barber avowed *her* doubts of it openly enough, and this at first somewhat raised doubt in the minds of others; but as there was absolutely nothing to corroborate these doubts—nay, as the Trailing Indian seemed, for that one evening at least, to be beyond the pale of suspicion, the thought of connecting Black with the disappearance faded out of the public mind. Mary Barber, however, do as she would, could not get rid of her fear so easily; it clung to her in spite of herself, and perhaps influenced in a degree some of those about her.

Sir Dene Clanwaring, waiving prejudices for the time being, made a call at Harebell Farm. Never since his son's marriage with Maria had he exchanged a word with Robert Owen, or condescended to notice him by so much as a nod in passing. He did not accuse the farmer of having in any way helped on the marriage, or of being privy to it; but his wounded pride would not brook the slightest approach to intercourse. In his interest now, his curiosity, and perhaps also from a better feeling—that of compassion for Mrs. Owen—he considered it his duty as landlord to call upon her. Mrs. Owen, however, was keeping her room, and was too ill to receive him; but he saw the son, who had been summoned home. William Owen was the eldest of the family; a slight, quiet young man of three-and-twenty, very much like his mother. He was with a farmer in Wiltshire, gaining experience, and earning a small salary. Harebell Farm had been no larger than Mr. Owen could himself

manage ; and the son was waiting until his father could spare the funds to take a small farm for him. Sir Dene was a little taken with the young man, whose manners were very gentle and pleasing. Sir Dene questioned Mary Barber as to her grounds for doubting Black —of which he had heard from his son Geoffry, and Mary Barber, nothing loth, regaled Sir Dene's ears with her singular dream. Sir Dene did not attempt to dispute the dream, or to ridicule it ; he simply asked, when the relation was over, what there was in the dream to cause her to suspect Black. She replied that the only part of the dream which could have referred to Black, was its conclusion—when they were searching for Mr. Owen in their distress, and were all making, as if by instinct, in the direction of the Trailing Indian—and that it was *not* the dream which led her to doubt Black, but the ill-feeling which the man, as was well known, had long entertained towards her master. Sir Dene nodded to this, and courteously took his leave. Since the finding of the document given by Squire Honeythorn, he had been very civil to Mary Barber when by chance they met, as though he would tacitly apologize for having doubted her mother's word.

The weather in England is capricious, as we know too well. Before Easter week was quite out, the lovely spring sunshine had given place to a heavy fall of snow. One day in the next week, when the ground was white, Sir Dene and his son Geoffry were walking home through Harebell Lane from a visit to some outlying land on the estate, and caught the sound of young voices in dispute, as they approached the pond. Suddenly a man's tones drowned the others.

"What's the matter, I wonder?" carelessly remarked Sir Dene to his son. "That's Black's voice."

The matter was this : Two little ploughboys, not quite so hard-worked as usual by reason of the snow, had met in the lane, and went in for a game of snow-balling. It ended in a quarrel. There was a tussle on the edge of the pond, and both fell into the snow and the rushes : fell on something that hurt the under boy. It proved to be a thick walking-stick, polished to the brightness of mahogany. Both lads seized it, each claiming it as his booty. Whilst they were fighting for possession, Randy Black came up the lane, pounced upon the



combatants, like the hawk in the fable, and took the stick. As Sir Dene came in sight he was holding it above his head, beyond the reach of the howling and indignant boys. Black had his back turned, and did not see that any one was near.

"What stick's that?"

The stern, authoritative interruption was Geoffry Clanwaring's. It arrested the boys' noise, and startled Black. As the man turned sharply to see who spoke, he flung the stick into the pond—and Geoffry, springing forward, was too late to save it.

"What did you do that for, Black?" demanded Geoffry.

"It's the best place for it, Mr. Clanwaring," was Black's answer, as he made a show of touching his hat to Sir Dene. "These young devils would 'a' fought within an inch of their lives for it, else."

"It is *not* the best place for it," returned Geoffry, with some emotion. "Wait an instant, sir," he added to his father, who was walking on. "Where did you get that stick from, Black?"

Something seemed to be the matter with Black; he had turned so deadly white.

"What stick was it?" questioned Black of the boys, moving to face them. "These young hounds were fighting over it when I came up."

"'Twas 'mong the rushes," sobbed one. "'Twas me had it first."

"Why do you inquire, Geoffry?" asked his father. "Is the stick anything to you?"

"Yes, sir. The stick was Mr. Owen's. It was the one he had with him that night."

"Nonsense!" cried Sir Dene, in surprise. "Mr. Owen's!"

"I am sure of it. As Black held it up, I saw it distinctly, and recognized it. What was your motive for throwing it into the pond?" he asked, turning on Black.

"Motive! I'd no motive, sir—but to pay out these two young varmints," was Black's ready answer. "Why don't you tell about the stick, and where ye got it?" he savagely added to the two young culprits, boxing one and pushing the other. "Not as I should think 'twas any stick of Owen's. 'Tain't likely."

"I tell you it *was*," said Geoffry, with a touch of his elder brother's hauteur. "How dare you dispute my word?"

"If you think so, sir, I'm sure I be sorry to have pitched it in," said Black, humbly. "I never thought it was a stick of any consequence; and I don't think it now. As to you two young varmints, I hope you'll come to be hung, for getting me into this row."

He touched his hat again and went on towards the Trailing Indian. Geoffry Clanwaring looked after him.

"Father, I do believe that man knows more about the past than he ought to know. He threw in that stick in sheer terror—to conceal it. So it seemed to me."

"Owen's stick!" cried Sir Dene, unable to realize the fact. "What is to be done, Geoffry?"

"We must have the pond searched, sir. If the stick was really lying amongst the rushes, the probability is that he is lying within it."

Sir Dene recognised the necessity for action; and no time was lost. In the presence of quite half the population of Hurst Leet, who flocked up to see the sight, Harebell Pond was searched. The stick was first of all fished up, and then its master.

Just as he had left home that night; in his great-coat, his magpie cap tied on over his ears, apparently untouched, not a fold of his garments ruffled, so he was found. At first it was supposed that it was a simple case of accidental drowning. But soon the discovery was made that he had been injured—apparently by a blow—on the back of the head. Was that blow wilful or accidental?

Squire Arde, making one of the throng, and whose opinion from his age and position had long held sway in the place, thought Robert Owen had fallen into the pond from above.

"When he left the cowshed that night he might have halted at the fence to look up and down the lane, have leaned too far over and overbalanced himself; his head struck against some sharp substance in the pond, which stunned him, and so he lay and was drowned. As to the stick, it fell amongst the rushes and was hidden. Or," added Squire Arde, "some villain struck at him from behind as he was standing above there,

stunned him, and hurled him over. 'Twas one or the other. Do you mind what I said the other day, Geoffry Clanwaring, about the brushwood being disturbed up there?"

The public accepted the notion from that hour. Robert Owen, either by accident or assault, had fallen over the fence into the water, and lay there quietly to drown. There was no proof at all; only supposition. The coroner's inquest was assembled, and brought in an open verdict: Found drowned in Harebell Pond.

And that was the ending of Robert Owen in this world. The ill-fated man was buried in the churchyard at Hurst Leet, a crowd of spectators attending the funeral.

One piece of impudence must be mentioned. On the day following the interment, Randy Black presented himself at Beechhurst Dene, and craved an audience of its master. He had come to ask for the lease of Harebell Farm, and offered to pay the first year's rent in advance. Sir Dene thought it the coolest piece of impudence he had ever met with; and very nearly (mentally at any rate) kicked Mr. Randy out of the house. Harebell Farm, he said, was not in the market.

That was true. It had been arranged that William Owen should manage the farm in his late father's place; and Sir Dene had already accepted him as tenant.

A week or two went slowly on. The inclement snow, the bitter winds again gave place to genial spring weather and bright sunshine. But, long ere a month had elapsed, a startling and disagreeable rumour arose in the neighbourhood—it was not quite certain whence or how. The substance of it was that Robert Owen could not rest in his grave, but came back to haunt the earth. It was said that he had been seen more than once hovering about Harebell Lane.

After the rumour had been well whispered about, the first person to see the apparition—or to fancy he saw it—was Sir Dene's butler. One moonlight night, towards the end of April, just about four weeks after that other moonlight time which had witnessed the disappearance of Robert Owen, Gander went up on an errand to the Trailing Indian, sent there by his master. Sir Dene happened to be out of tobacco; none, for miles around, was to be had so good as that kept at the

Trailing Indian, and even Sir Dene did not disdain to avail himself of that ill-favoured house's stores. "Buy a pound of it, Gander," said he, "and as much more as Black will spare."

Gander received the tobacco, paid for it, and accepted the glass of ale hospitably proffered by Black. Like his master, he could forget the inn's doubtful reputation when his interest was concerned—and Gander knew what good ale was as well as any one. So he sat down and had a chat with Black.

"How's the young woman that was ill here?" he asked.

"She's not about yet," answered Black, angrily, for the matter had annoyed him from the first. "Got a bad leg, or something."

After sitting about a quarter-of-an-hour, Gander started quickly homewards with the tobacco. "That's a rare good tap," he said to himself, as he went along the lane. "Wish Sir Dene would keep as good a one for us!"

‡ In approaching the pond, he began thinking of him who had not so long ago been found there; which was only natural; and the association of ideas caused him to glance at the fence above. And if ever a man felt turned into stone, Gander did then.

For there, leaning over the fence and staring at him—just as he might have leaned the night of his death—was the well-known form of Robert Owen.

"Mercy be good to me!" gasped the butler.

Wildly grasping the tobacco, Gander sprang off with a shout that might have been heard at the Trailing Indian, and never drew breath until he burst into the servants' hall at Beechhurst Dene.

## CHAPTER XV.

### SAD DAYS.

THIS chapter will be a sad one, but there is no help for it. The reader will say, attributing the story to the writer's imagination, Why make these people, in whom we have grown interested, *die*? The answer is—Because they did die. For this tale is not a fiction, but a record of the past: of people who lived, and

of events that happened to them. And if an author would be a faithful narrator, he cannot put sunshine for darkness, or darken that which was light.

Some months have elapsed since the death of Robert Owen, and they have brought at least one grave and grievous misfortune in their train. Geoffry Clanwaring, out one day with a party shooting small birds, had received a gun-shot wound in his side. There was little outward damage, and he soon recovered ; but the doctors had a suspicion of some grave internal injury : and if their fear proved correct, poor Geoffry would not be long for this world. His father knew nothing of this fear—indeed, it was confined pretty much to Mr. Priar and the other surgeon—a skilful man from Worcester—who had attended him in the accident. Not being absolutely certain themselves, they did not talk about it. The relations between Sir Dene and Geoffry remained the same : cordial, but not intimate : and Geoffry and his wife had not been admitted as guests within the gates of Beechhurst Dene.

No new light had been thrown upon the death of Robert Owen. The singular report—that his ghost might be sometimes seen in and about Harebell Lane—did not subside. Whilst some scouted it as utterly absurd, and old Squire Arde laughed over it till his eyes ran tears, the greater portion of the community gave ear to the story. Gander—as related—had been frightened almost out of his senses. He was not the only one ; and Harebell Lane was more than ever shunned at night. Mrs. Owen remained at Harebell Farm with her son William, and things went on there in their old groove.

There were great doings at Beechhurst Dene the first fortnight in September. John Clanwaring, the heir, brought down his newly-married wife on a visit, and a party was invited to meet them. She was very pretty, and a great heiress ; altogether an irreproachable match—as John Clanwaring, with his caution and pride, was sure to make. It served, by contrast, to darken the marriage contracted by Geoffry ; and if by ill-luck Mr. Clanwaring met his brother, he would pass him as scornfully as he might have passed some despicable character—say Randy Black, for instance—his head in the air. At the fortnight's end, the company quitted Beechhurst Dene again.

all except John Clanwaring and his wife. They remained on for another week or two ; but their home was in London.

A few days before their departure, the brothers again met. It was a lovely September day : the sunlight lay on the plains, the woods were beginning to assume their beautiful autumn tints. Mr. Clanwaring, his wife on his arm, was about to cross a stile in the Dene woods, when Geoffry appeared on the other side. Geoffry was at it first, but, in courtesy to the lady, waited. John Clanwaring got over, handed over his wife, and walked on with her. Excepting that he drew his coat closer round him in passing his brother, he took no notice of him whatever. It galled Geoffry, who thought John might have introduced his wife to him when they thus met face to face.

"I wonder whether he would have done it if he knew there's a chance that I shall soon be lying low?" thought Geoffry. "And that chance exists. I cannot well mistake my own feelings, and Priar, unless I am wrong, knows it better than I do."

Geoffry was on his way home to the bailiff's lodge. Busy with Sir Dene's affairs that morning, out of doors as well as within, he had allowed the time to slip away past the dinner hour. He could not ride about as he used to do before his accident. Maria would be waiting for him, he knew ; so he put his best foot foremost. Not the fleet foot it once was, for quick walking pained him almost as much as riding.

The first person he saw on entering his cottage home was Mr. Priar. Geoffry mentally leaped to the truth at once : his wife must be ill. Even so. Her illness had been waited for for some days now : Geoffry was expecting a little heir ! Heir ! It was a slip of the pen. Heir to what ?—his misfortunes ? What strange contrasts exist ! When John's wife should present him with a son, it would be the future inheritor of a title and of the rich lands of Beechhurst Dene ; Geoffry's child would be only a humble dependent. Could poor Geoffry have foreseen how humble, how dependent, how despised and put upon, he might have wished to take the child with him when he himself should come to die.

"Is all going well ?" was Geoffry's first question to the surgeon.



"I—hope it will," answered Mr. Priar—and the slight want of assurance in his tone at once struck Geoffry. "We have been sending for you to Beechhurst Dene, Mr. Geoffry; the messenger brought back word that you were not there."

"I left Beechhurst Dene two hours ago, having things to attend to up at Simmons's. Is my wife very ill?"

"Not very; not particularly so. You can see her."

Mrs. Geoffry Clanwaring was quite alone in her sickness. Her mother, Mrs. Owen, was confined to her bed with illness just then; her sister, Mrs. Arde, growing gradually but surely weaker, was not able to come over. Maria herself had been in more delicate health all the summer than she need have been: her father's death and the sadness surrounding it had shaken her greatly.

But if Mr. Priar had entertained any doubt of the result, it would seem to have been needless. The baby made its appearance, and was a fine boy. When Geoffry first took the little curiosity in his arms, he felt prouder of him than if he had been born heir to a throne.

"How light its hair is, Maria!"

"Yes; it is like yours," she answered, with a happy smile.

"I can trace a likeness to you and to Sir Dene."

"He'll be a fine little shaver if he's like my father. We shall have to choose a name for him, love."

Just a day or two of these fond hopes, this delusive security, and then a change came. Dangerous symptoms set in for Maria Clanwaring; and a horseman went galloping to Worcester for one of the city's best surgeons. He came and saw her, in conjunction with the dismayed Mr. Priar, and they no doubt did their best, if anything, best or worst, could be done. It was all in vain: the life, fleeting away, could not be arrested. The baby also began to droop; it almost seemed as though it would go with its mother. The truth had to be told to Geoffry.

Evening came on. The bustle of the going and coming of the medical men, of the awful shock, was past, and over the household reigned a solemn stillness. She lay on her bed, pale, quiet, exhausted, resigned; far more resigned than poor stunned Geoffry. He sat by the fire, more as one in a dream than in his senses; but for disturbing her, he would have taken the pale,

sweet face to his breast, and cried aloud to Heaven in his despairing anguish.

"Perfect quiet, Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring," had been the doctors' urgent warning. "Once excite her to emotion, and all will be over."

So there he sat, controlling his bitter grief he knew not how ; his golden hair damp with the struggle, his blue eyes clouded with misery.

The clergyman came ; and Geoffry and his dying wife partook of Christ's last sacrament together. Next, the baby was brought forward for baptism ; Maria wished it done. Geoffry leaned over his wife to ask her wishes about the name.

"Call him Tom," she feebly said. "It was my dear little brother's name who died : and it is one of yours, Geoffry."

"Tom," said Geoffry, returning to the clergyman.

"Tom?" echoed the minister, questioningly, his fingers already dipped in the water.

"Tom," repeated Geoffry.

And so "Tom" the child was christened.

So bewildered and confused with trouble was Geoffry Clanwaring, that he never remembered until too late that the name ought to have been Thomas. It was a mistake ; but a mistake that did not cost him a regretful thought. Under the shadow of real calamities, trifles are as nothing.

Almost before they were alone again, the last moments approached for Maria. Geoffry might give way as much as he pleased then ; emotion could no longer harm her in this world. He held her to him in his anguish, his hot tears falling on her face.

"Not for very long, my darling ; the separation won't be for long. Only a little while, a few weeks, or months at most, and I shall follow you."

She looked at him as if scarcely understanding.

"Ay, it is so. I have kept it from you, Maria ; I meant to let this illness of yours be well over before I spoke. And oh, my wife, my dear one, I know not how I should have told you—or how have borne to leave you here behind me. I am dying of that gunshot wound, Maria ; there was some fatal internal injury. I have suspected it all along, and to-day when

the doctors were here, I got them to acknowledge that they suspect it too. You will not have to wait long for me on the other side."

She was beyond speaking much, but a glad light shone in her dim eyes. Geoffry's sobs sounded in the room. Let us leave them together for the last hour.

All had been so rapid that there was no time to apprise the world of the danger that had suddenly set in. But the news was spreading now, and some people were arriving in consternation.

Mary Barber was the first to do so. She had been staying at Worcester for some days with Mrs. Arde, and had only returned to Harebell Farm that afternoon. Geoffry Clanwaring's modest household consisted of one servant only, Susan Cole, eldest daughter of Cole the farrier; a good-natured, talkative girl of eighteen, with frizzly hair and a fixed colour in her face. She was in the kitchen with the nurse when Mary Barber arrived. And when Mary Barber heard that life was all but over, after giving a minute or two to digesting the shock, she almost shook Susan Cole.

"You heartless, wicked huzzy! You couldn't come up to say so?"

"I didn't know it till just now," returned Susan, who was crying silently for her pretty young mistress. "It has come on us as suddenly as a blow. As to master, he's like a man dazed. I don't believe he's been able to recollect anything. But he *did* send to the farm."

Standing in the small kitchen, Mary Barber thought over the past two or three hours. Upon her return from Worcester, Joan had said a messenger had been up to say there was a change in young Mrs. Clanwaring; and Mary Barber set off, but not at once, for she had never thought of *this* change.

"Where's the baby?" she asked, in a whisper. For, now that the first shock to her feelings had been relieved by blaming some one, the extent of the calamity subdued her.

"Sleeping in his cradle," said the nurse. "He seems a bit better to-night than he did earlier in the day."

"What will be done about bringing him up?"

"Oh, as to that, children sometimes thrive as well without their mothers as with them," returned the nurse.

A movement overhead, and a call from Geoffry, sent the nurse and Mary Barber upstairs, the latter throwing off her cloak and bonnet as she went. The last moment was at hand; fleeting spirit and earthly tenement were fighting in their separation.

"My poor lamb!" wailed Mary Barber, leaning over the pale face, quiet again now. "Oh, wasn't it enough that your poor father should have gone—that your sister should be fast going—but that the Lord must take you also! We'd say it was cruelly hard—only that His ways are not as our ways."

There was a gentle flutter on the face, and Maria turned her head upon the pillow, looking to a distant part of the room.

"Yes," she said in a distinct, cheerful voice, as though answering a call.

Geoffry was hastening round, but Mary Barber lifted her hand for silence. *She* knew the sign—and what it meant.

"Hush, Mr. Geoffry. She's passing now. It was her answer to the summons!"

The spirit passed even as the woman spoke; passed with a deep, long sigh. Mary Barber caught her breath with another.

"I knew death was coming to the family, Mr. Geoffry, but thought it was for Mrs. Arde. I knew it by my dreams."

As Geoffry quitted the room, like one who gropes his way in the dark, so stunned were all his faculties, he became dimly conscious of a sharp knocking at the front door. Susan Cole opened it, and the voice of Sir Dene was heard. That aroused him to passing events, and he went downstairs. Sir Dene was standing in the parlour; their one sitting room, that Maria had made so pretty. Vases of flowers stood about, fresh still; she had put them there on the morning of the day she was taken ill.

"Geoffry, what's this I hear? That your wife is in imminent danger," began Sir Dene. "Coming out just now for a stroll after dinner, I met young Harry Cole, who mentioned it to me."

"My wife is dead, father."

Sir Dene looked at his son, as if he thought his mind must be wandering.

"Yes, she's dead," was repeated by Geoffry's quivering lips. "Only now; not three minutes ago."

"Lord bless me!" broke from Sir Dene.

He backed against the bookcase, and stood staring, waiting for his senses to come to him.

"Why! you told me yourself this morning, Geoffry, that she was going on all right!"

"And so she was, sir. A change took place an hour or two after mid-day. Priar came, and Dr. Woodyat was fetched. They could not save her."

"It is awfully sudden," cried the dismayed Sir Dene. "Poor thing! Poor young thing!"

Geoffry, now at the end of his equanimity, put his head down on the table and sobbed aloud. Great sobs that shook him. Sir Dene wondered whether there was any brandy in the house, or any other cordial, and where he could find it. Self-reproach was stinging him keenly. When those we have injured, or not sufficiently regarded in life, are dead, it is then that repentance touches us. He had not been as kind as he might have been to this poor young girl, now gone from them all for ever. True, he had been pleasant and courteous when they met; but he had never invited her within his gates, had not treated her as a daughter-in-law; and he wished now that he had done so, in spite of the prejudices of his eldest son and heir.

"Don't give way, Geoff, my boy. Don't! Bless my heart, but this is a dreadful blow, and I'm—I'm truly sorry for it. Poor young girl! but little more than a child! Can I find a drop of brandy for you, Geoff?"

Geoffry did not want any brandy; could not have touched it. Striving manfully with his emotion, he there and then disclosed to his father the fact that he himself, as he truly believed, should not live long after his wife; the same grave might almost be kept open for him. It would have been a greater shock to Sir Dene than the other, but that he put no faith in it.

"Dying of that gunshot wound!" he repeated. "Geoffry, my poor fellow, things are wearing their gloomiest hue just now; it is only natural. If there is anything wrong inwardly, we'll soon have you set to rights."

"Father, I don't think there'll be any more setting to rights for me; I don't indeed. You can ask Priar or Woodyat about

it; they know, I fancy. It's only within a week or so that I have felt sure of it myself."

"Nonsense, Geoffry. It was not much of a hurt at the worst. You shall be doctored up."

Geoffry said no more. But a sure and certain prevision lay upon him this evening, that his own end was not far off. It might come upon them almost as suddenly at the last, he thought, as his wife's had come upon him.

"Geoffry, I should like to see her," said Sir Dene, when he rose to depart.

They went up the narrow staircase with hushed footsteps. The house was as one of death in its utter stillness. The infant slept in another room; Sir Dene never once thought about him at all.

They had already dressed her for the grave. The sweet, calm, pale face looked almost like that of an angel. Sir Dene felt pain, regret, grief—almost as when his own wife died.

"Poor darling! Poor innocent child!" he murmured, touching her brow. "May the good Lord have taken her to His rest!"

"She was kind and good and pure as one of Heaven's angels, father." And Geoffry's emotion broke forth again.

As Sir Dene was walking up the Hollow on his way home, the bell suddenly rang out from Hurst Leet Church. Mary Barber had sent Susan Cole flying to the sexton. Sir Dene stopped and listened: it seemed to bring the event before him more forcibly than ever. Three times two: and then the sharp quick strokes to denote the passing of the soul.

"I wonder who's gone now?"

The irreverent words, for the careless tone made them so, absolutely startled Sir Dene. Standing to listen, his face turned towards the village, he had not observed that any one was near. Tempted by the beauty of the evening—a warm, still, moonlight night—John Clanwaring had come out for a stroll just as his father had previously done. It was he who spoke.

"What did you say?" asked Sir Dene, sharply turning upon him.

"I thought you were listening to the passing-bell, sir. Some village woman, I suppose."



"They would not trouble themselves at this time of night for a 'village woman,'" said Sir Dene, sternly, for the words grated on his present frame of mind. In truth, he had not been feeling very genially towards his heir as he walked up. But for him, Sir Dene would have relented towards Geoffry and his poor young wife; he saw things clearly now, and knew it.

John Clanwaring wondered at the tone. "Do you know who it's for, then, sir?" he asked.

"It is for your brother's wife."

"For *who*?" cried John Clanwaring, forgetting his grammar in his surprise.

"For your brother's wife. Don't I speak plainly enough? Geoffry's sweet, pretty young wife, poor Owen's daughter, is dead."

"I'm sure I'm sorry to hear it, for her sake," said John Clanwaring, somewhat taken aback. "It is very sudden, is it not, sir?"

"It is sudden. You were harshly contemptuous to her in your judgment; she is gone where neither harshness nor contempt can reach her. She looks like an angel, lying there, with her pale, innocent face."

"It is a sad fate for her, poor thing; I really pity her, sir," admitted John Clanwaring. And there was a pause.

"I am not sure but Geoffry will be the one to go next," resumed Sir Dene. "We shall wish then, perhaps, that we had been a bit kinder to them."

"Is he likely to die of grief?" asked John.

"Grief's a complaint *you'll* never die of; you haven't feeling enough," retorted Sir Dene. "Geoffry talks of that shot he had a while ago; he fears it left some fatal injury behind it. For my part, I think it must be only fancy."

"Of course it is only fancy," returned John Clanwaring. "Were there any fatal injury, Geoffry could not go about as he does."

They fell into silence. The quick strokes of the bell were dying away to give place to its slow and monotonous tolling: a weird, solemn sound, breaking out at intervals in the stillness of the autumn night.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## IN THE MOONLIGHT.

"You had better come back to Beechhurst Dene, Geoffry."

The speaker was Sir Dene. They had just returned from the funeral, and Sir Dene had entered Geoffry's home with him, leaving the other mourners—John Clanwaring, George Arde, and William Owen—to disperse. Mr. Clanwaring had condescended to attend the funeral. Sir Dene put it to him strongly that he *ought* to do so: therefore he delayed his departure for town, and waited. It probably went against the grain to stand side by side with William Owen, mourners at the same grave: but John, cool and impassive, made no sign, though he had condescended to shake hands with Geoffry, and to say he sympathised with him in his loss. Sir Dene went in with Geoffry afterwards. The little dwelling seemed strangely still and solitary; and Sir Dene felt chilled.

"You had better come back to Beechhurst Dene, and be taken care of," he repeated. "Now that the poor young thing's gone, there's no one to do anything for you here; nothing to keep you in the place. Geoff, my boy, *I* never disliked her."

"No, father, I don't think you did."

"I shall never forget that time I saw her at Malvern, toasting a pikelet at the fire, standing so sweet and modest in her white frock. 'Twas as pretty a picture as a man ever saw."

Geoffry, who was beginning to look very worn and thin, made no answer. His heart was full.

"Then you'll come back home, Geoff?"

"Yes, father, thank you; I think I had better—if John does not object."

"John object!—John be—shot!" exploded Sir Dene, keeping back the stronger word he had been about to use when he remembered where he had just been. "It's not John's house yet, to be ruled by him. He and his wife are posting off again, I'm glad to say; somehow, things are never

so pleasant when he is at home. Come to-morrow ; to-night, if you will. You must never think of running off from me again, Geoff."

Geoffry smiled faintly. "Not in the same way as I did before, father ; I'll promise you that."

"Nor in any other, I hope," was Sir Dene's quiet rejoinder. "We'll nurse you into health again at the Dene."

Accordingly, the following morning, Geoffry Clanwaring walked up to his old home just as though he were going to make a call, or do an hour's work in the business room, as usual. He carried in his arms his not yet fortnight-old baby, wrapped in a red shawl. As he was about to enter the gates, there came rattling down the avenue a close carriage-and-four, the post-boys spurring their horses to make the exit in proper style, after the fashion of the day. The carriage bore the arms of the Clanwarings, and John, the heir, sat in it with his wife ; a man and maid in the rumble behind. Geoffry stood aside to let it pass. No one saw him but the valet, who touched his hat—and wondered, no doubt, what Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring was carrying in the red bundle. They were commencing their journey to London. Mrs. Clanwaring, he noticed, did not wear mourning.

"And yet Maria was every whit as good as she ; ay, and better," thought Geoffry, as he went on up the avenue, a mist before his eyes.

Not for Mrs. Clanwaring's want of mourning. No. But this home-coming with the little helpless burden, brought all too painfully to his mind what he had lost.

"Goodness me !" exclaimed Sir Dene, as Geoffry sat down in the library, and undid the shawl. "Why—that's your baby, Geoffry."

"Yes, father. I couldn't leave him behind."

"Bless the child ! I declare I forgot all about him. Well, the women shall take care of him. There's plenty of them to do it. What's his name ?"

"Tom," replied Geoffry. "She was anxious about it before she died, and I had it done. The child drooped and ailed that day, just as though it knew its mother was leaving it. It seems all right now."

"You mean Thomas, I suppose."

"No: Tom. The mistake was mine. I was bewildered with grief, and said 'Tom' twice over to the parson, never heeding that it should have been Thomas. It will not matter, father: Tom is as good a name as any other."

"No, it won't matter," replied Sir Dene. "What does he live upon, Geoff?"

"Barley-water mixed with milk," said Geoffry. "He won't cost much. Susan Cole is bringing some up, and can show the maids how to feed him."

The child, who had slept through this, awoke now, opening his eyes. Sir Dene advanced to look at him such a little face, peeping out of the shawl. Geoffry took off the cambric cap, and showed his bits of fair hair.

"He has just the look that you had at his age, Geoffry. I remember it well. The first of you born, John, had a black head, like his mother; you were fair, like me. It's a pretty infant, and will be just like you."

"So poor Maria said. Like me and like you, she thought."

"Ay: at your age I was much what you are, Geoffry. Poor motherless bairn!" added Sir Dene, pityingly, as he touched the baby's face.

"Soon to be fatherless also," spoke Geoffry.

"No, no, my boy; I trust not," said Sir Dene.

But Geoffry shook his head: he knew better.

"Father, you'll give him house-room when I am gone, won't you?"—and the words seemed to come from the very depths of an aching heart. "He'll be in nobody's way, poor little waif."

"I will, Geoff!" heartily answered Sir Dene, his eyes dimmed by some earnest tears, that rose and were checked. "I promise it you. The child shall be as welcome here as ever you have been. There's my hand upon it."

People rarely give themselves more trouble than they can help. None of the maids showed themselves too ready to undertake the onerous charge of an infant, as proposed by Sir Dene; and when Susan Cole arrived with its food, and sundry of its clothes, the servants, who did pretty much as they liked, told her she had better remain for a day or two,

and see to the child. The day or two grew into a month or two, and that into an indefinite period, Susan Cole taking entire charge ; Sir Dene falling in with the arrangement as if it were a matter of course. He was very fond of the child, would often nurse and toss it ; and when he saw its sleeves tied up with black ribbons and a black sash round its waist, that Susan Cole put on the day poor Geoffry died, Sir Dene held the little face to his own for some minutes, as if that black ribbon made a fonder and closer link between them.

So the baby grew, and thrived, and cut its teeth, and learnt to walk and talk, just as other healthy and happy children do. Sir Dene loved the boy ; Susan Cole was proud of him ; Gander admired him more than he had admired anything since poor Geoffry himself was young ; and the other servants alternately indulged and snubbed him. With it all—in spite of his being Sir Dene's grandson and that he had his home at Beechhurst Dene—he was not altogether considered by the servants as a child of the house ; never receiving the deference that a son of, for instance, John Clanwaring would have received.

The boy, as he grew older and stronger, incurred the danger of being allowed to run wild. Sir Dene had about as much idea of the way to bring up a child as he had of rearing a young tiger ; and no one else interfered. There was no day nursery. As long as the child was in arms, Susan Cole sat where she pleased with him—generally in the kitchen or servants' hall ; when he could run, he roamed at will about the house. Sir Dene would take him up and talk to him, and put him by his side at table, calling for a plate and spoon for the child. If Tom ran out to see Sir Dene mount his horse, Sir Dene would lift him on to the saddle, bare-headed and bare-armed, and ride off with him, perhaps for miles, in the summer weather. When not with Sir Dene he would be left very much to his own devices, for Susan Cole was a terrible gossip, and considered social intercourse with any one who would talk to her as the sweetest thing in life. There were times also when Sir Dene was away from Beechhurst, and during these seasons Tom received very little attention from any one. Gander, who was regarded by Sir

Dene as head of the servants, and in a measure ruled them, would be with his master, and at home it would be high-life below stairs. To save trouble, little Tom's plate and fork would be laid at the kitchen table: the child would be brought into meals; and that was about all the care they gave him. He was one of those quiet, happy children who amuse themselves; would sit for hours on the library floor, looking at a picture-book, or in some remote room surrounded by the animals of his Noah's ark. The servants knew the child was safe, and that was sufficient. Cole, the farrier, had a journeyman, who was Susan's sweetheart; consequently she passed a great deal more time in her father's forge than in looking after Tom. In fact, excepting the odd moments of tenderness bestowed upon him by Sir Dene, the child was very much what his poor father had called him the day he brought him up in the red shawl—a waif. He was wonderfully pretty and engaging, with his mother's sweet temper and gentle manners, and his father's kindly blue eyes and fair curls. A child to be loved and cherished: a child that with proper training would make a good and noble man; one to whom God had been generous, in implanting in his heart a full portion of most excellent seed.

Sir Dene was often away. He had taken permanent rooms in London, and could go there at will. John Clanwaring never came down now to Beechhurst Dene. His wife's health had been very delicate since the birth of her child, a girl; John said she was not strong enough to move about, and therefore he did not do so. At any rate, it was a good excuse for remaining in the place he liked best and never cared to be out of—London. Perhaps this took Sir Dene there. John was not his favourite son—he was gone—but John was better than none; and he found it very lonely at Beechhurst Dene. So, he and Gander away for weeks together, the servants took their own ease and Tom his own way. No wonder the neglected child grew fond of going to Mrs. Owen's, and once or twice had run off there alone. He also went to Squire Arde's.

No longer the old Squire, the little man who had been so odd and quaint, but a new one. There were changes everywhere. The strange little old man was dead, and George



Arde reigned at the Hall, and was called Squire in his turn. The will the late Squire left was almost as odd as he himself had been ; so at least thought the world.' It was certainly unexpected. An idea—gathered from observation of his character, and perhaps from occasional words he had let fall during his later years—had become fixed in men's minds that he would never leave a shilling of his money to any relative, but to charities, and especially to those charities connected with the insane. "Droitwich will be the better for his savings," quoth the neighbours one to another—alluding to the well-known asylum—when the news went forth that Squire Arde was dead.

The neighbours were mistaken. Squire Arde's will did not give a shilling to any charity ; Droitwich asylum was not even mentioned in it. The Hall, with all that belonged to it including its income, was left to George Arde, to his own intense surprise.

George Arde's wife was not then dead. In her very delicate state she had lived on much longer than any one could have supposed possible, fluttering ever, it may be said, between life and death. Now and then the old Squire would call when he was at Worcester, and see the child, little Mary, to whom he seemed to have taken a fancy. Necklaces, and trifles of that description that had belonged to his own dead child, the other Mary, he would bring to it. "I should not be much surprised at his leaving her a thousand pounds," said George Arde one day to his wife, when the Squire had been and brought with him a new coral with silver bells.

Not one thousand did he leave the child, but twenty. The will bequeathed a certain sum of money to "Mary, daughter of my third cousin, George Arde." This sum, already out at good interest, would represent twenty thousand pounds on the day Mary Arde should be eighteen ; and it was to be hers then unconditionally. So little Mary, granddaughter of the late unfortunate Robert Owen, and cousin to young Tom Clanwaring, turned out to be quite an heiress.

Before George Arde took up his abode at the Hall, his wife died. She had been in so weak a state, and it had become so evident that her death was near, that the trouble of removing

was spared her. She died in the small house where they had lived, and was buried in the same mouldy old church that had witnessed poor Maria Owen's stolen marriage—St. Peter's. After that, George Arde and his little daughter went to the Hall.

This occurred when Tom was about a year old. Two years had already gone by since then. The boy was fond of running to the Hall, Susan Cole enjoying the society of the servants, Tom that of the little girl. George Arde welcomed the lad freely, whenever he was at home: but he had taken to visiting about a good deal. Rumours of his second marriage were abroad; George Arde, owner of Arde Hall and Squire of the parish, still young, and an agreeable man, was no undesirable match, and was courted accordingly.

Would the child-heiress live to enjoy her wealth? The question was arising. Symptoms of delicacy—she was her mother's child all over—were beginning to show themselves, and it was feared she might not live long. George Arde was intensely fond of her, and perhaps the first thing that put a second marriage into his head was the wish to have some kind and gentle lady in the house who would watch over the child, and be as a mother to it. Once having made up his mind to this, Mr. Arde was not long about it; and chose his second wife from one of the first and proudest families in the county. It was rather singular that the day of the marriage should be little Tom's birthday: he was three years old.

On that self-same night occurred an incident which must be recorded. Robert Owen appeared again. The unhappy rumour that his spirit came back to trouble the earth had never died away. From whatever source arising, whether delusion, superstition, or actual if unaccountable fact, they gained ground and spread. No sooner had one report of the appearance had time to subside and people began to forget it, than another would arise. Now it would be a belated labourer, going home at a tardy hour up Harebell Lane; now a carter's boy; now some traveller on his way to the Trailing Indian. On the night we are now speaking of two people saw it, one of whom was Black.

Black had been down to Hurst Leet on business. Coming

home again about nine o'clock in the moonlight, he burst into the Trailing Indian in a fearful state of agitation. More abject terror could not well be seen. Mr. Priar happened to be there—for Mrs. Black's sickly state required him to pay her an occasional visit, and he would go up at any odd moment that leisure allowed him; two or three men were also drinking in the kitchen; when in burst the landlord in the state described. That his fear was genuine could not be mistaken, though how it was possible for so hardened a man as Black to feel afraid of anything earthly or ghostly, Mr. Priar, for one, could not imagine. Mixing some brandy-and-water, the doctor made him drink it. Black's teeth chattered as he told that he had seen Robert Owen standing at that part above Harebell Lane, where he was supposed to have fallen, and gazing down at the pond. Question after question was poured into Black's ear, especially from the startled men, but he could tell no more. Coming up the lane by the pond, he happened to turn his eyes up to the fence above the water, and there, leaning over it, was the figure of Robert Owen, his face white as it had been when he lay dead, his beard silvery as it was in life. Black did not stay to give a second look, but came off as fast as his legs would carry him; and the strangest thing of all was, that he should sit there in his kitchen and confess it. But fear will take pride, and reticence too, out of the most hardy men.

Before Black had at all recovered his equanimity a choice friend of his came in—Michael Geach, who had arrived that evening on one of his unexpected visits to the Trailing Indian. One might have expected ridicule at least from Geach; but, on the contrary, the tale seemed to make him rather uncomfortable.

"I never was a coward," he observed, "but it's no light thing would persuade me into Harebell Lane of a night now. Hanged if I'd not rather come slap upon a body whitening in chains on the gibbet, than see Owen's ghost. Cheer up, Randy, and don't shake so; you look all blue."

"When did *you* come here?" asked Black, in no pleasant tones.

"Me! I've been here this hour and more, waiting for you to come in,"

"Why couldn't you have sent word you were—— Drat it all! *You needn't shake and shiver.*"

The concluding observations were made to Black's wife. His eyes happened to fall on her as he was addressing Geach, and he left his sentence to that worthy gentleman unfinished. Poor Robert Owen might be a ghost, but he could not look more like one than did Mrs. Black. Her face was livid: her hands entwined themselves one within the other in nervous dread that Mr. Priar had rarely seen equalled. Black, forgetting his own symptoms, told her she was a fool, and sent her from the room.

Well, Randy Black was not the only one to see the ghost that night. And if the reader reproaches me for repeating these superstitions, I can plead but one apology—that I am merely relating the events as they occurred of this very true tale. The other to see it was William Owen.

The reports that Robert Owen's spirit could not rest had greatly annoyed the inmates of Harebell Farm. Even superstitious Mary Barber, setting aside her private convictions for the honour of the family, protested far and wide that it could not be true. None of them had seen anything to warrant it, up to this time; not even William, who was often out at night on his land; though not on that part of it that lay towards the Trailing Indian. The very fact that the ghost was said to haunt those fields, and especially the two-acre meadow, caused him not to put sheep there. The shepherd absolutely refused to go near the spot at night.

This evening William Owen had gone on foot to a farm-house, a mile or two beyond the Trailing Indian. Mary Barber had prepared a hot supper for him, and when nine o'clock struck she wondered how much longer he meant to be. Soon afterwards she heard his footsteps, and opened the back door to admit him.

Could it be the moonlight that made his face look so white? Taking no notice of her, he walked straight into the best kitchen, where his supper was laid.

"What's the matter now?" cried Mary Barber, following him, and gazing in surprise at his strange countenance. "Are you ill, Mr. William?"

His face was white as death, and he was wiping the moisture from his brow with a trembling hand. Mary Barber saw that no light matter was stirring him.

"What is it?" she said, lowering her voice to a whisper that seemed to partake of his own dread emotion.

"I have seen my father," was his answer.

"No!" she exclaimed.

"Mary, as true as that you and I are here, I saw him. There was no mistake about it. He looked exactly as I've seen him look a hundred times in life: his old cap on, his white beard flowing."

"Heaven be good to us!" cried Mary. "Where was this?"

"I crossed the stile opposite the Trailing Indian, to come straight home over the fields," said William Owen. "Just past the narrow path between the trees and the fence above the pond, I chanced to look back: and there, standing with his back against the trees, looking after me as it seemed, I saw my father. I stood as one turned to stone, not knowing, I believe, whether to go forward or backward, or what to do; and there it stood, the two of us staring at one another. The next moment the thing was gone; had vanished into air, as it seemed to me; and I came away, leaping hedges and ditches."

Mary Barber held her breath; her young master bent his head on the old-fashioned mantelpiece. Presently he spoke again.

"I have been wondering whether anything caused me to look back; any sound or movement. It could hardly have been chance."

"Nay, 'twas no chance, Mr. William. I wonder—what—it can want?" she slowly added.

William Owen could not say, any more than she could. All he knew was, that he would give half his future life not to have been subjected to the terror and distress of the visitation.

"You should have gone up and spoken to it, Mr. William."

William Owen looked at her, a strange horror in his eyes. "I wouldn't have done it for that bowl full of sovereigns," he said, pointing to the large tureen on the dresser. "Were I ever to see it again, I could not remain on the farm."

"It's an awful thing."

"Take care that you keep it from my mother, Mary."

"And from all other folk as well, Mr. William," was Mary Barber's answer.

But the story got wind, or at least, a suspicion of it. Added to the more detailed account of what had befallen Randy Black, it was sufficient to frighten a timid neighbourhood : and people grew into a strange dread of Harebell Lane after darkness had fallen.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### VERY MUCH OF A WAIF.

"GRANDMAMMA !"

Mrs. Owen, who had dropped into a doze in her easy-chair, did not hear the call. The handle of the door was twisted this way and that by little fingers, and the appeal came again.

"Won't you let me in, grandmamma ?"

"Is it little Tom ?" cried Mrs. Owen, rising to admit the intruder.

Little Tom it was, poor Geoffrey's orphan boy, and Mrs. Owen tottered back to her seat, child in hand. She was always weak and ill now, as her most delicate and gentle face betrayed. Never strong, the sad death of her husband, and the subsequent death of her daughter, had proved almost fatal to her. She certainly lived on, but as a woman who has nearly done with this world, and whose whole thoughts are in the next.

She took off the child's hat—a broad-brimmed straw hat, with some yellow ribbon tied round the crown. Lifting him on her knee, she pushed back the golden hair from his open forehead, and gazed into his earnest, dark blue eyes. He was small for his age. Three years old on the previous day—for this was the morning following the events related in the last chapter—he might have been taken for little more than two ; but, as is sometimes the case with these small bodies, the mind was unusually advanced. But for his exceedingly retiring



disposition, the shy sensitiveness of his nature, with its invariably accompanying reticence, he might have been that most undesirable thing, a precocious child. His gentle manners saved him from it.

As if divining somewhat of the peace of Mrs. Owen's inward life, the boy when with her was ever more gentle than at other times, strangely thoughtful, quiet, and tractable. It has been said that this story is not one of fiction; and people were wont to remark one to another during this latter portion of Mrs. Owen's years, that her life lay in heaven. Whilst she was looking at those wonderful eyes—and the child really had such, they were so beautiful—he began to cry.

“Why, Tom, what is it?”

“Grandpapa rode away without me. Susan wouldn't make haste with my things, and he did not wait. When I cried, she said I wanted shaking.”

“Did Susan bring you here?”

“No. I came.”

Mrs. Owen need scarcely have asked the question. The child had come off without ceremony, in his brown holland pinafore and old straw hat. Susan would have dressed him.

“Will you read me a Bible story, grandmamma?”

“Ay,” said Mrs. Owen. “Run and fetch the book.”

There were Bible stories for children in those days just as there are in these: but they were read less. Mrs. Owen took care that Tom should hear them. He could just reach the little book from the side-table, and brought it to her. The child was so fond of hearing one of the stories in particular, that the book opened at the chapter—Christ forgiving the thief on the Cross. His little tongue, as yet imperfect, was never tired of asking questions: and sometimes Mrs. Owen's ingenuity was puzzled to answer them.

But it was not only that she read to him: that was the least part of it. The story over, she would close the book, and talk to him, as on this day, in a loving, winning, gentle voice. Talk to him of heaven and the glorious happiness of those who shall attain to it: of what he must do in this world, or rather try to do, if *he* would be one of them: of patience in long suffering; of loving kindness to others; of self-sacrifice

for their benefit ; of truth and honour, and generosity : all in language suited to his years, but clear and forcible. She would impress upon him the great fact that God was ever near him, watching, guiding, hearing him ; and she contrived so to imbue him with the belief in God's loving care, that the child trusted to it above and beyond any earthly thing. These early lessons did him good service in after-years ; without them he might never have borne the indignities cast on him.

"Grandmamma, I'll never be naughty. Never."

Mrs. Owen, knowing too well the corruption of the human heart and the temptations of the world, only smiled sadly in answer.

"Was mamma ever naughty ?"

"Oh yes."

"And papa ?"

"Yes."

"But they went to heaven !"

"Yes, dear. They went very near together, too. The thief on the Cross had been very, very naughty ; but the moment he asked Jesus to forgive him, Jesus did so, you see."

"I'll ask, if ever I am naughty," said the child, after a thoughtful pause. "Grandpapa Owen went too. And you'll go, grandmamma. And I'll go."

"But you must first grow up to be a man and do a great deal of work in this world, and a great deal of good," said Mrs. Owen. "God sent us here to work."

"Shall we work in heaven ?"

"I don't know. If we do, it will be pleasant work, angels' work. Yes, no doubt, we shall work."

"Have you had to do a great, great deal of work here, grandmamma ?"

"Yes, a great deal. And I have had to bear a great deal of sorrow ; sorrow, and sickness, and heart-break. But for God's loving help, Tom, I don't think I could have gone through it."

"Shall I have a great deal of sorrow ?"

"You will be sure to have it sooner or later. Don't forget what I have told you, Tom—that God often sends the most to those He loves best. You must be very brave in all things"

"Yes, I'll be brave," answered unconscious Tom.

The sitting over, he jumped down, and ran to find Mary Barber. Mary Barber, preserving damsons in the back-kitchen, and also sadly disturbed by William Owen's communication of the previous night, was too busy to have much leisure for Tom. Spreading some of the hot jam upon a slice of bread, she told him to run into the garden and eat it.

Tom was making for the garden in all obedience—never a more obedient child than he—when William Owen's dog Sharp came barking up to him in play. It would go wild with delight at seeing the child. The dog ran, and Tom after it, neglecting his jam, until they reached the gates at Harebell Lane. Sharp bounded over the smaller gate, and knocked down a little girl in a pink cotton bonnet and tattered frock. Tom, with inherent gallantry, ran to help her up.

It was the child, mentioned a few chapters ago, born at the Trailing Indian the night of Robert Owen's disappearance. She was called Emma Geach. Before the mother was strong enough to leave the inn, Mrs. Black fell ill with rheumatic-fever. The woman undertook to nurse her, and to do the work. The illness proved of some months duration, and Mrs. Geach stayed on. After that, she would go away and return by fits and starts, but did not take her child with her. The child had never been away from the inn, and for all that could be seen to the contrary, it seemed likely to become her permanent home. Mrs. Black liked the child, and would have kept her always. Black did not like her, and was almost savagely angry at her being left there: but gossip said, he did not dare to turn her out or insist too strongly on her removal, lest Mrs. Geach in revenge should betray some of the secret doings of the Trailing Indian.

"Don't cry," said Tom. "I'll give you some bread-and-jam."

The child stood up at the tempting offer, and ceased roaring. Born six months before Tom, she looked at least a year older; a tall child, with hair that looked like threads of fine-spun gold, chubby red cheeks, and eyes of so remarkably light a shade that they might have been called white, rather than blue. Tom divided his bread-and-jam, and gave her the larger half.

Whether Miss Geach was starved at the Trailing Indian, or that damson jam was a luxury unknown to her, certain it was that she devoured it in a wonderful manner. It disappeared before Tom had finished his first mouthful.

"I want some more," she said, fixing her greedy little eyes on the remainder. So Tom, never hesitating, broke it again, but not so deftly as before : the crumb and the jam fell to one part, the dry crust to the other. He handed the best to the child, and nibbled away at the crust.

"What's your name?" asked Tom.

"Emma. What's yours?"

"Tom. Where do you live?"

"Up there," pointing her finger. "I've a whistle at home ; 'll you come and see him?"

Whistles are tempting, and Tom yielded without question. The two children ran up the lane comparing notes of possessions : Tom's Noah's ark and picture-book, and a whip with a green handle, against Miss Geach's whistle. The dog, sharing the crust with Tom, leaped beside them. Randy Black met them close to the inn.

"Halloa !—who have you got here, you little wretch?" cried he to the girl. And she answered boldly, without sign of fear.

"I'm going to show him my whistle."

Black had spoken almost before giving a look at the boy ; and immediately knew him for the little grandson of Sir Dene Clanwaring, and of the dead master of Harebell Farm. He had seen him about often enough since his babyhood, with Susan Cole or Sir Dene.

"This bain't no place for little gentlefolk, master ; you'd best run home again. As to you," he added, to the girl, "if you bring stray children here, I'll souse your head in the horse-trough."

"Mayn't I see the whistle?" asked Tom, who had not understood a word in ten.

"Wait," cried independent Miss Emma to Tom. "I'll bring him out."

Black did not interfere, but stood gazing at the boy, whistling softly.

"You're the very cut o' your father," said he. "Same eyes, same hair, same face. He'd ha' made a second Sir Dene in looks ; so'll you. Not bad 'uns, them eyes of yours."

All the little boy's answer to this was to look up at the man with these self-same eyes. Even Black the hardened could but note, you see, their kindly nature, so full of sweetness.

"What's your name?" he went on, less roughly than he was given to speaking.

"Tom."

"Bain't it Dene? Nor Geoffrey?"

"It's Tom," repeated the boy.

"Where's your hat?"

"I left it at grandmamma's."

The ostler appeared in the yard, and called out some question to his master. As Black departed, Emma ran out with the whistle, blowing with all her might. As Black passed her he gave her a box on the ears which made her stagger and drop the whistle. Perhaps she was used to being boxed, for she did not cry or complain ; only waited until he was a few paces from her, and then picked up the rough wooden toy Mrs. Black had bought from a man at the door for a halfpenny.

Had it been of ivory or gold, it could not have appeared more precious to little Tom, as the two whistled in turn, long discordant whistles that might almost have startled the cows grazing in William Owen's field over the way. Mrs. Black came to the door to discover the reason of so much noise : a poor, pale woman, more meek and shrunken than ever, since her long spell of rheumatic fever had left her fingers crippled and contracted. Young though the girl was, she was already of some use in the house : and perhaps that was one reason why Black did not insist upon her removal.

"Emma, what boy's that?" demanded Mrs. Black—just as Black had done.

The whistle was too absorbing for Miss Emma to answer immediately. After several repetitions of the question she turned round.

"His name's Tom."

Mrs. Black came slowly out ; her feet were affected as well as her hands, and she was now little better than a cripple.

She had begun to talk to the children pleasantly enough when Black returned and sent the group flying ; Mrs. Black and the girl indoors ; Tom down the lane with all the speed of his little legs. He was constitutionally brave ; and by the time he turned the corner had forgotten all about the inn and its people. Blackberries grew in abundance, and Tom helped himself, scratching his hands, and staining his face and pinafore. In this condition he was pounced upon by Susan Cole, who at once administered a shaking. Tom, full of contrition, looked at his hands and pinafore, and then offered Susan some choice berries squeezed up in his fingers. Instead of accepting the treat with gratitude, Susan sent the blackberries flying.

"You audacious, naughty child ! Where's your hat ?"

"On the table at grandmamma's."

Dragging him by the hand to the farm, Susan Cole dashed into the back-kitchen, where Joan happened to be washing, and washed his face and hands. Then finding his hat she took him off again.

"Now, Master Tom," she said, as they crossed the lane and entered the back-gates—"if you take to going off by yourself, nobody knows where, so frightening me into fiddlestrings and getting yourself into this pickle, I'll run away and leave you. I won't stay at the Dene any longer to serve an ungrateful little boy."

Tom was very quiet during the afternoon, playing with his Noah's ark, and giving no trouble to any one. The servants were busy that day, for company was expected at the Dene. Lady Lydia Clanwaring, the wife of Captain Clanwaring, Sir Dene's youngest son, had just landed from India, with her three children, and her arrival at the Dene might happen at any hour. Sir Dene anticipated a long visit, and looked forward with pleasure to an event that would break the monotony of his home life.

Sir Dene reached home for dinner. Tom's quick ears heard the horses' hoofs, and he ran out, and met them half-way down the avenue. The groom dismounted, lifted the child up in front of his master, and Tom was conveyed back in triumph.

"Master Tom will dine with me," said Sir Dene to Gander, as he led him indoors,



So the child sat beside his grandfather, chattering more than eating, for he had just had tea. No longer the young vagabond scouring the lanes, but a little prince in crimson velvet, a frill of snow-white cambric on his neck, and his curls falling in a shower of gold. Susan Cole always took care to dress him towards evening, in case Sir Dene should ask for him.

"Emma's got a whistle, grandpapa," said Tom, when they were left alone at dessert.

"A whistle, has she?" replied Sir Dene, not in the least knowing or caring who "Emma" might be.

"A whistle, all green and blue, grandpapa. I wish I had one."

"Tell Susan to go to Hurst Leet to-morrow and buy you one," was Sir Dene's answer.

"I'm afraid she won't. She's angry with me."

"Oh, indeed! Have you been a naughty boy?"

"Yes. I stained my hands and face with the blackberries, and spoilt my pinafore."

Sir Dene laughed: a very venial offence, this. "There's another walnut for you, Tom. Peel it, you rascal."

"Mary Barber gave me some bread-and-jam, grandpapa. Sharp knocked Emma down, and I——"

A commotion outside arrested the history. A chaise-and-four had clattered up to the front-entrance. Dogs barked; servants ran; Gander rushed into the dining-room.

"Sir Dene, I'll lay anything it's my Lady Lydia," said he. And Sir Dene went into the hall.

It was Lady Lydia Clanwaring. A tall, meagre woman, two or three years past thirty, with a pale, discontented face, sharp features, keen, restless black eyes, and thin compressed lips. Her children followed her, black-eyed and black-haired; the eldest, a girl, seven years old, two boys, six and five. As though fatigued with the journey—they had posted up from Portsmouth—Lady Lydia sank into a chair as soon as she entered the dining-room. The children ran to the table, and stood eagerly eyeing the good things upon it.

"They would like some fruit, Gander," spoke Sir Dene. "Bring plates."

Hats and bonnets were thrown on the floor. The children

dragged chairs to the table, and seated themselves without further ceremony. Tom, who had shyly retreated to the background at the irruption, remained unseen.

"Take care that everything is brought in, Doveton," cried Lady Lydia to her maid, in the same hard, shrill voice that had grated on Sir Dene's ears in India—for he liked that most excellent thing, a sweet voice in woman. "There must be at least twenty small packages inside, of one sort or another."

When the bustle had a little subsided, Sir Dene inquired after his son Reginald, who remained in India.

"Captain Clanwaring was very well when we left him, but as cross as a bear," replied Lady Lydia. It was a peculiarity of hers that she always called her husband "Captain Clanwaring." "The life is wearing, out there: and last season was a frightfully hot one. No, Jarvis, you *can't* have more wine; you are going to have supper. Louisa, don't crack a walnut with your teeth! Jarvis, crack it for your sister."

"Crack it for her, Otto," said Jarvis, imperiously, to his brother. And the younger one obeyed.

"Captain Clanwaring says there's no chance of his getting leave. None. Just now——"

The words died away. Lady Lydia had turned from her children to face Sir Dene again; and stopped in utter astonishment. A beautiful child, in crimson velvet with blue eyes and golden hair, was leaning familiarly against Sir Dene; had stolen his little hand within his. What child could it be?

"Who is that?" demanded Lady Lydia.

"It is my little grandson," said Sir Dene.

Little grandson! That John Clanwaring the heir had now an infant son in long clothes, Lady Lydia was aware of. There could be no other grandson. She thought she had heard, as the French express it, *à tort et à travers*.

"*What* grandson? Who is he, Sir Dene?"

Sir Dene answered by taking the child on his knee. "Tell Lady Lydia what your name is, and who you are."

"Tom," said the child.

"What else?" continued Sir Dene.

"Tom Clanwaring."

"Now tell them who you are."

"I'm grandpapa's little boy."

Sir Dene, pleased with the words, kissed him fondly. Lady Lydia knitted her brows and glanced keenly from her black and restless eyes.

"He is the son of my dear boy, Geoffry, who's dead and gone, Lady Lydia. Poor Geoff left him to me as a legacy."

It took Lady Lydia a minute or two to digest the words — and she did not fully understand them, even then. That Geoffry Clanwaring had made some low marriage before his death, and so brought disgrace on himself and the Clanwaring family, she had heard. John the heir had sent out his version to India : Captain Clanwaring had been quite as indignant as John, and at once wrote back his opinion to Sir Dene. But to see this fair child, sitting on Sir Dene's knee, fondled by him, and evidently at home at Beechhurst Dene, was something so different from the ideas Lady Lydia had formed of the affair, that she did not quite at once recover her equanimity.

"Does he — live here?" she asked in condemning amazement.

"Oh, yes. He has no other home."

"Where's his mother, pray?"

"Say where," said Sir Dene, to the boy.

"Mamma's dead," said Tom. "She and papa went to heaven."

"Ay ; within three months of each other ; the same grave received them both, Lady Lydia."

And to her ladyship's infinite astonishment, she saw that Sir Dene's eyes, bent on the little boy's head as he spoke, had filled with tears.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### AT BEECHHURST DENE.

THE handsomest guest-chamber Beechhurst Dene afforded, with a small, cheerful sitting-room opening from it, had been assigned by the servants to Lady Lydia Clanwaring. The title imposed upon their ears. The heir's wife, really of better family, and

an heiress into the bargain, was only plain Mrs. Clanwaring ; Lady Lydia received homage accordingly.

The Lady Lydia was the daughter of a poor and obscure Irish earl, and had absolutely not a shilling of her own in the world. Her father, Mr. Riley, had unexpectedly succeeded to the title, and perhaps it was the long fight with poverty which had rendered her so sharp in worldly matters, mean in petty details, grasping in everything where money was concerned. When Mr. Riley came into the title his daughters were grown up ; until then, they had all led a scrambling sort of life, their time passed in one long endeavour to make both ends meet ; sometimes in a remote corner of Ireland, sometimes in a cheap Continental town. After succeeding to the title, Lord Greybrooke was not much better off, for the estate, never worth very much, had been impoverished until the rentroll was almost nominal. One of Lydia Riley's sisters had married an officer in an Indian regiment. Lady Lydia went out to stay with them, and there met Lieutenant Clanwaring. Stationed in a quiet place where there was little society, they were thrown much together, and one day Lieutenant Clanwaring made her an offer ; or what she chose to consider an offer ; and in point of fact, he said more than he could retract from with honour.

She did not let him retract. He would have laughed it off, but found he could not do so. He had never meant anything, he said to himself ; had spoken thoughtlessly in the excitement of the moment ; but he had to abide by it. How many men are there who have been caught in a like manner ! Mr. Clanwaring submitted to his fate with a good grace, and made no sign. Beyond a word which escaped him one night in Gander's hearing when he came to his father's rather shaky from the mess dinner, he never betrayed that the Lady Lydia was not his free choice. He was but a boy, barely of age ; she was three or four years older in years, and half-a-century in depth.

So they were married, and until now had lived together in India. Lady Lydia had had time to grow heartily sick of an Indian life, and of making the best of a narrow income. Sir Dene gave his younger son only a small allowance ; at the same age he, himself, had been obliged to make his pay sufficient, and he thought it no hardship for his son to do the same. Weary of

It altogether, Lady Lydia determined to have a change. She told her husband the time had come when it was necessary the children should go home, both for health's sake and education. Captain Clanwaring tired of it, also weary of his wife's fractiousness, and the troublesome, noisy children, agreed. He wrote to his father, asking him to receive them for a time, until suitable schools should be found ; and Sir Dene acquiesced with pleasure. On this first night of their arrival, Lady Lydia told Sir Dene she should remain about a year in Europe, visiting different friends in England and Ireland, and then return to her husband. In her heart she cherished a very different plan—never to return at all, but to establish her home and rule at Beechhurst Dene. If there existed one woman more capable than other women of carrying out her scheme, that woman was the Lady Lydia Clanwaring.

On the way home, throughout the many months' discomfort of the sailing vessel—there were no fast steamers in those days—she had been reckoning her chickens. “Sir Dene has neither kith nor kin ; no grandchild to make much of,” she would ruminat, “for John Clanwaring and his wife do not go near Beechhurst Dene. The field lies open to me. I will be mistress ; my children their grandfather's idols.”

But Lady Lydia, to her intense astonishment, found that Sir Dene *had* a grandchild near him, living in his home, allowed to climb his knee, altogether made as much of as she had intended her own children should be. More especially had she cherished this hope for her elder son, beloved by her in that inordinate degree that mothers sometimes love their children. It is said that like clings to like. Certain it is, this young Jarvis Clanwaring was remarkably like his mother, both in person and temper. He had the same pale, sharp face, the keen, restless black eyes, with the sly look in them ; in disposition he had the same crafty depth, and the secretive, unpleasant temper. The younger lad, Otto, was a dull, plodding boy, worth ten of his brother, who invariably tyrannized over him. From the moment Lady Lydia saw the child Tom on Sir Dene's knee, she resolved that he should lose his footing in the house if manœuvring could accomplish it.

She stood at her bedroom window the following morning, looking out on the early sun. Lady Lydia was far too restless a woman to lie late in bed, even on the day following a tiring journey. She had just coiled her coal-black hair round her head, but had not removed her dressing-gown. The fine panorama lay beyond, with its green fields, woods, gleams of water, and handful of dwellings; Hurst Leet, the little village, was near at hand, the fair city of Worcester might be seen in the distance; all things looked charming under the blue sky of the autumn morning. But to Lady Lydia they were as nothing. *She* gazed with covetous eyes at the park beneath, and whatsoever pertained to Beechhurst Dene. "A fine old place," she repeated to herself, "and I will reign here."

The door opened, and she turned to behold Doveton, her maid, a woman who was quite as crafty as her mistress. Lady Lydia had lost no time in commencing her plans. On the previous evening, when she went upstairs to take off her things before supper, the vision of the fair child in his crimson velvet dress clouding her mind, she called Doveton, and charged her to find out all particulars concerning the boy—how he came to be there at all, and why and wherefore. Doveton liked nothing better than ferreting out secrets for herself or her mistress; to do her justice, she was in that respect a faithful servant.

"Doveton," began Lady Lydia, "have you arrived at any of the facts of the case?"

"I flatter myself I have obtained a few, my lady," minced Doveton, as full of conceit and affectation as any fine dame of the period. "It was quite an error of judgment to allow the child to come here at all."

"The mother was a very low person, I know."

"Frightfully low, my lady. They live at a farm near; quite working people; altogether inferior. The girl was pretty, and Mr. Geoffry was drawn into marrying her one day when Sir Dene was safe away in London. A fine uproar there was over it. Sir Dene posted down from London with Mr. Clanwaring, and an aunt posted over in her carriage from somewhere nearer. They turned Mr. Geoffry out of the house, and he went off to lodgings with the girl. Sir Dene relented a little later, let him live in a cottage on the estate, and made him his



bailiff. The wife died when the child was born, and the day after she was interred, Mr. Geoffry came home here again and brought the infant with him wrapped up in an old shawl. And here the infant have been ever since."

Doveton's tale was tolerably correct, you see. Fortune favoured her. An under-housemaid, Patty, who was about to leave, had fallen in Doveton's way. In the woman's sore feeling she had put the worst colouring on the past, as connected with Geoffry Clanwaring and his wife, simply because Susan had been their servant. Revenge makes too many of us unjust.

"The girl's people live near, do they?" remarked Lady Lydia, when she had listened to what Doveton had to say.

"Quite close, my lady. It's an old farmhouse, right opposite the back-gates here, just across the lane. The little child is running there continually."

"Then why cannot the child be with them altogether?" was Lady Lydia's indignant rejoinder.

"Why indeed, my lady!"

Lady Lydia said nothing further; and perhaps thought all the more. That this low-born child, this interloper, should certainly lose its hold upon Beechhurst Dene and be sent adrift, she fully resolved. But she knew that she must proceed cautiously. Very smooth and smiling was her face as she went down to breakfast.

"Will you allow me to preside, Sir Dene?" she asked, when her children were seated.

"I wish you would—if you don't mind the trouble," heartily replied Sir Dene—who, hating exertion himself, as many who have lived long in India do, had been about to order Gander to pour out the coffee. So Lady Lydia took her place at the head of the table—and kept it for the future.

In came Susan Cole. "Is Master Tom to take his breakfast here this morning, Sir Dene?"

"What d'you say?" cried Sir Dene, who had not caught the words, as he turned to the speaker.

"Master Tom wants to take his breakfast with you, Sir Dene. He knows, you see, sir, that the other children are here."

"To be sure: let him come by all means," was Sir Dene's

answer. And the lady, busy with the coffee-cups, did not like the warmth of the tone.

So Tom came. In a cotton frock this morning, with a clean brown holland blouse over it. Susan placed his chair beside Sir Dene, and put down his basin of bread-and-milk.

"Say good-morning to your cousins, Tom," said Sir Dene; and my lady gave a resentful cough at the word cousins. Tom held out his little hand to each in succession, and they shook it in silence, staring at the boy as if he were a wild Indian. The children had not brought very civil manners with them. Then Susan lifted him into his seat, and Sir Dene kissed him.

It happened that Sir Dene had to go to Worcester that morning, to attend a public meeting. His phaeton came round at eleven o'clock. Lady Lydia stepped out to admire the horses.

"I want to go, mamma," said Jarvis. "I *will* go."

Lady Lydia appealed to Sir Dene with a sweet smile. "You will take him, Sir Dene?"

"Can't, to-day," replied Sir Dene. "Should not know what to do with him in Worcester."

The lady's face clouded—threatening signs of one of her unseemly passions. "Oh, do indulge him this once," pleaded the mother. "All is strange to him here as yet, poor dear little fellow."

But Sir Dene was not one to do a thing against his will. On the whole he was not fond of children—Tom excepted—and very much disliked to be put to any personal trouble with them.

"Very sorry, Lady Lydia, but I am going in on business. The meeting may last for hours: it would hardly do for—what's the lad's name—Jarvey—to be left in the streets. The coachman can drive them all out to-morrow."

Sir Dene got in, taking the reins, the groom stepped up beside him, and away they went. Master Jarvey's first move was to fling himself on his back on the gravel and kick and howl. His next move was to spring on to his feet, furiously tear up a handful of gravel and fling it after the carriage.

"Nice bringings up," cried Susan Cole, critically, in Gander's ear.

"*Her* bringings up!" retorted Gander, nodding in the direction of Lady Lydia. "Don't think she knows much about that sort of thing."

"You don't like her," remarked Susan. "No more do I." }

"I didn't like her in India, nor anyone else: young Mr. Clanwaring of course excepted," added Gander, with a curious expression. "And I don't like Doveton either—birds of a feather. Doveton had her fox's nose inside my pantry this morning, whispering with Patty: I'd like to know the reason why."

Lady Lydia, smarting under Sir Dene's rebuff to her boy, whom she idolized as no other human being ever could or would be in this world, retired to her rooms in dudgeon, where Doveton proceeded to unpack, assisted by Susan Cole. By-and-by Lady Lydia put on a bonnet and shawl, and strolled out to the back-entrance to look about her. Not a corner of the passages but was taken in by her observant eye; not an outside bush but was noted. Gander, coming to the door with a table-cloth, saw her peering into the glass doors of Sir Dene's parlour. With careless ease, Gander seemed in no hurry to retreat again, but stood there leisurely shaking his cloth.

"This appears quite a business room, Gander," she remarked, stepping back. "What a quantity of papers lying about!"

"It is Sir Dene's business parlour, my lady."

"His business parlour! What has Sir Dene Clanwaring to do with business?"

"With an estate like this, there's a host of business to be transacted. I know this much, my lady, it pretty nigh drives my master at times off his head. Dell, the bailiff—one he took on after poor Mr. Geoffry died—ain't much good as it seems to me, for folks come up here all the same worrying Sir Dene. Where do those two paths lead to, you ask, my lady? The one straight before you goes direct to Harebell Lane: the other on the right—the Privet Walk, it's called—takes you round to the front of the house."

Lady Lydia, avoiding the Privet Walk, chose the straight one before her, and arrived at the gates opening to Harebell

Lane. Remembering Doveton's words, she looked about for the farm ; but the high hedge opposite concealed it. She went her way up the lane on an exploring tour, and reached in time the Trailing Indian.

Two little ragamuffins, upon whom the Lady Lydia did not vouchsafe a second glance, stood near, blowing a whistle. The one ran up to show it to her in his sociable nature.

"Look ! It's Emma's."

To Lady Lydia's unbounded astonishment, she recognised Tom ; but Tom in unmitigated grief, as far as his clothes were concerned. In the busy state of the Dene that morning, Tom, neglected, had taken the opportunity to run off, as usual, to Mrs. Owen's. In the lane he was waylaid by Emma Geach, and that young lady seduced him into staying and playing with her. Companionship is sweet. Having tasted it once, she no doubt longed for it again, and had come off surreptitiously in the hope of finding Tom. Running up to the Trailing Indian in search of the whistle, which she had not brought out, Tom fell down near the pond, and covered himself with mud. Emma, by way of consolation, supplied him with blackberries, and face, hands, and pinafore were a picturesque compound of general disreputableness. Lady Lydia turned her outraged eyes on the other child, an unmistakable ragamuffin of the lowest type, with clothes shabby and torn, and socks down at heel.

"Is that your sister?" demanded Lady Lydia on the spur of the moment, her ideas somewhat bewildered.

"It's Emma," repeated Tom. "Grandpapa said Susan was to buy me a whistle like this, but Susan hasn't time to-day."

Every nerve within her revolted at the word "grandpapa," as applied by this child to Sir Dene. "Where does 'Emma' live?" she asked.

"I lives there," cried the girl, with all her native readiness, pointing to the Trailing Indian.

Lady Lydia cast her eyes on the inn, picked up her skirts, and walked on. "Low-lived little animal!" she exclaimed, not caring whether the roadside inn bore any relationship to Tom, or none. "And it is *this* child of disgraceful connections who has been admitted to Beechhurst Dene !"

The high-road, running just beyond the Trailing Indian, did not seem to promise much interest for Lady Lydia, and she turned back. The child, Emma, had been called into the inn then, and the door was shut. Tom, left alone, ran by the side of Lady Lydia, unconscious that he was doing wrong.

"What do you mean by following me?" she stopped to ask. "Why don't you go home?"

"I'm going to grandmamma's," said Tom. "It's down here. I tumbled down, and Mary Barber will wash me."

He spoke timidly. The angry face had a look in it that frightened him. Children have keen instincts, and Tom drew behind. At the turning of the lane he suddenly ran in front of her, into the arms of a young man who was advancing: a gentle, pleasant young man, wearing working clothes. It was William Owen.

"Oh, Tom! what a mess you are in!" he cried—and then took off his hat to Lady Lydia as she passed.

Tom repeated that he was going to ask Mary Barber to "wash" him. William Owen put him down, and told him to make haste about it.

"Who was that?" Lady Lydia condescended to ask Tom, when he came on.

"Uncle William," said the child. "He gave me a little boat one day."

Lady Lydia tossed her disdainful head. Uncle William!—a mere clodhopper! and this objectionable child, with low connections and companionships, was allowed to call Sir Dene Clanwaring grandfather, and to make the Dene his home.

The child—the offences of the morning condoned by Susan—appeared at dessert again in his velvet dress—but this time it was blue instead of crimson. Susan Cole, in conjunction with Miss Reynolds, the famous mantua-maker on the Parade at Worcester, had been allowed to order him attire after the pride of her own heart, unchecked by her master. It was with difficulty Lady Lydia kept her temper down to a decent state of tranquillity. She had assumed the head of the table, as at breakfast; but the temper, bubbling up with strange fierceness, betrayed her into an incaution she was not often guilty of—that of speaking at the wrong moment.

After the children were gone to bed, and she had been in the drawing-room a long time alone, Sir Dene came in from the dining-room. In those days men drank a great deal of wine: and Sir Dene whilst not exceeding as many did, liked a liberal glass. To-day, however, the reason of his tardy sitting was, that, fatigued with his tiresome meeting in Worcester, he had dropped asleep at the table. Lady Lydia, nursing her rage all that time at the prospect of what she was pleased to term her children's wrongs in having found a supplanter in Sir Dene's affections, entered at once upon the battle. Very quietly, craftily, and tenderly, as though she were an angel of consideration, and had no interests in the world at heart, excepting Sir Dene's and Tom's.

Tom's sad connections were hinted at; Tom's low predilections; Tom's vagabond state out of doors—as witness how and with whom she had found him that day. For such a child the Dene was not a suitable home, she gently pointed out: and—would it not be better to send him to his grandmother Owen's?

“Send him to his grandmother Owen's?” repeated Sir Dene, when he had gathered what all this was leading up to—and he spoke a little sharply, as it seemed to his wary listener. “Why, what do you mean, my lady?”

“Even at the cost of having to pay a slight yearly sum for his maintenance. Sir Dene, I only suggest it in the child's interests.”

“His interests can be taken better care of at Beechhurst Dene than in his mother's family,” returned Sir Dene. “You must be dreaming, Lady Lydia.”

“I fear, unfortunately, that I am rather wider awake in regard to this matter than you can be,” she said, with the sweetest smile she could assume. “Were the child to remain here, he would grow up with notions ridiculously unsuited to his future position.”

“And what do you fancy his future position will be?” retorted Sir Dene, his temper roused. “The child is my grandson, Lady Lydia: you don't suppose I shall turn him out into the world to follow the plough, do you?”

“Oh, Sir Dene! the plough!” she simpered.



"Well, Lady Lydia, what is it you do mean?" he asked.

And then, vexed in her turn, she said openly that the child ought never to have been at the Dene—ought to be sent from it without loss of time.

"Never, whilst I live and am master here," was the firm answer. "I gave my hand on it to my dear son, Geoffry."

"It is scarcely behaving fairly to your other sons, Sir Dene. To Mr. Clanwaring's wife; to me. The young woman was so very obscure and plebeian."

"She was one of the best and loveliest ladies the world ever saw—I can tell you that, my lady," returned Sir Dene, in choler.

"But plebeian, I say. Were her friends not able or willing to receive the child, he should have been sent to the parish. It is really not *becoming* to have him here—and to make much of him, as though he were a son of the house. Pardon me, Sir Dene, I am only speaking in all our interests, his included."

"Very likely you are, my lady; but as your notions and mine don't agree in this, the subject may be dropped. Geoffry was my favourite son: and this little son of his has taken his place in my home, and will keep it."

Sir Dene rang the bell as he spoke—a peal that startled Gander. Susan Cole was wanted.

"What is this I hear?" thundered Sir Dene, when she appeared. "That you suffer Master Clanwaring to run wild in the lanes and play with any vagabond child he may pick up! Take better care of him in future, Susan, or you may end your service at the Dene."

And the Lady Lydia, smoothing her fingers over her cambric handkerchief at the fire, found she had spoken somewhat too soon. Her rebellious heart rose up within her, and had to be forcibly controlled to silence.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## INJUSTICE.

THE June roses were in bloom, and the hot Midsummer sun lay on the white highways, on the fields sweet with the drying hay, on the yellowing corn.

On never a fairer road than the one you have so often heard of, Dene Hollow, down which went a lad on his pony, Otto Clanwaring. Running after the pony, as it turned out of the Beechhurst Dene gates, came Jarvis Clanwaring, and, standing with his back against the fence, was Tom. Time has grown older, and the boys have grown with him. Tom is nearly seven now, Otto nine, Jarvis ten.

With this exception, there is not much change in them. Jarvis is thin and wiry as ever, with the same dark, sly eyes; Otto is rather fat, dark, and stolid; Tom has the same golden hair, frank face, and kindly, thoughtful blue eyes. The three boys are at school, but not at the same school; for Lady Lydia Clanwaring has successfully contrived that Tom shall not contaminate the establishment honoured by her own boys. They have come home for the Midsummer holidays, and are tired with the long morning spent in the hay-field. But that Jarvis is excessively so, and has besides some appointment connected with ferrets, he would have taken the pony himself. It is one Sir Dene keeps for the boys' use when they are at home, and is called Whitestar, from a mark on its forehead.

Tom is standing perfectly still against the fence, near the exact spot on which had once stood the cottage of the widow Barber. He is in a brown study, watching the approach of the pony and its rider. Gander had told him he might go out on the pony that afternoon; but, just as he was about to mount, the two elder ones ordered him away, and took it themselves. Tom feels no resentment, only a little disappointment: it does not occur to him that he is ill-used, for he has been accustomed to giving up to his cousins in all things.

Otto put the pony into a gentle canter, and came on; Jarvis was following on the pathway. As the pony passed

Tom, it swerved violently, dashed off at a gallop, and threw its rider. Jarvis rushed up in a fury.

"You young hound!" he cried, seizing Tom's head and beginning to pummel it, "what did you frighten him for?"

"I didn't frighten him," said Tom.

"You did! I saw you."

"I didn't, Jarvis; I didn't, indeed," cried Tom.

Otto came back, rubbing his head and looking rueful, his clothes dusty, and his temple grazed.

"Was it him did it, Jarvis?"

"Of course it was him, nasty little devil! He's always up to some mean trick."

"Otto, I didn't," persisted Tom. "I didn't do anything."

"I heard him give a hiss, and I saw him kick his leg out and throw a stone; and it frightened Whitestar."

Now this barefaced assertion was neither more nor less than a deliberate lie. Jarvis had all his mother's facility of invention, and was never happier than when exercising it to the detriment of the scapegoat Tom: scapegoat in every sense of the term: and destined to be one, poor fellow, for many a long day to come!

Otto looked from one to the other—on his brother's face, with its evil black eyes; on Tom's piteous one, with its tears. Otto had this good quality—that if he knew a lie to be a lie he would never uphold it; no, not even for Jarvey. But Otto was by no means good-natured; he was too selfish to trouble himself to be so; and, moreover, he was being reared to despise Tom and put upon him.

"I never stirred my leg or hissed, and I didn't throw a stone," pleaded the lad. "It wasn't me, Otto."

Jarvis kicked and pummelled, whilst a man who had caught Whitestar was leading him up. Thus the damaged party entered the Dene gates. Lady Lydia, seeing it from her window, came flying out to learn what the matter might be, and heard of Tom's iniquities. Poor Tom's voice was like a little piping reed amidst the fierce tones of his accusers: even in self-defence he scarcely dared to assert himself in the presence of Lady Lydia. She had long ago inspired him with an awe that he did not attempt to resist.

They had it out in the hall: Doveton and some of the inferior servants looking on. Gander was not in the way, neither was Sir Dene. Lady Lydia was in a silent passion; and, to do her justice, believed, in this instance, that Tom was guilty.

Child though he was, she hated him with a bitter hatred. The fear of Sir Dene had not let her entirely crush him; but she was doing her best towards it in a quiet way, working for it safely and silently.

"Wicked little reptile!" she cried, her eyes blazing. "Poor dear Otto, riding without thought of treachery, must have his pony startled and his life endangered by *you*! Take him, Doveton, and whip him. Whip him well."

Doveton seized Tom by the hand to bear him off to punishment. It came pretty often, this chastisement, and Tom neither might nor dared resist. On trying to resist once, the whipping had been redoubled; in Doveton's strong hands Tom was powerless.

"Mamma," said deliberate Otto, after a minute or two given to pondering matters in his own mind, "I'm not sure that it was Tom. He doesn't often tell stories."

Tom never told stories. One of the chief characteristics of the boy was innate truthfulness. He had learnt to be silent and take unmerited correction as his due, but an untruth he had never told in his life. No one at the Dene believed this; even its master almost doubted. The fact was, Jarvis and Tom were so very often in opposite tales—and Jarvis was both keen and crafty, with the advantage over Tom of three years—that Tom was beginning to be looked upon by some of them as a little storyteller.

"I say it mightn't have been him," repeated Otto, a second time, finding that he received no notice. "Shall I go and tell Doveton not to whip him?"

"No," sharply returned Lady Lydia. "He is not whipped often enough, low-born brat!"

"But if he *didn't* frighten Whitestar?" persisted Otto, who was not without a sense of justice.

"Not frighten Whitestar? Did you not hear Master Clap-wareing say he saw him! Hold your tongue, Otto."

Just as she had called her husband Captain Clanwaring—Major Clanwaring now—so did she generally speak of her eldest son as “Master Clanwaring,” even to his brother and sister. Otto to the servants was “Master Otto;” Tom simply “Tom” when she condescended to name him at all; generally she spoke of him as “that boy.”

Lady Lydia's resolve to remain and rule at Beechhurst Dene had been admirably carried out. Very soon after her arrival trouble sprang up with the servants. Assuming full control and management of the household affairs, she introduced certain new rules and regulations, which the old servants rebelled against. Warfare waged hotly, and blame lay on both sides. Lady Lydia was arbitrary; they, long accustomed to their own will, were insolent. The result was, they left in a body, dismissed by Lady Lydia. All went, including the housekeeper and Susan Cole. My lady had cautiously tried to get Gander dismissed also, and failed; Gander was perhaps a firmer fixture at Beechhurst Dene than was she. A new set of servants came in, and things went on peaceably, Doveton being promoted to housekeeper. That Lady Lydia was a very good manager could not be denied: with fewer servants there was a great deal more quiet order and less outlay. Sir Dene felt the benefit of her rule: his purse was spared, he enjoyed more comfort, was grateful accordingly, and learnt to put trust in the Lady Lydia. As to her quitting the Dene, such a thing was never mentioned. Sir Dene was glad to have her there, the house had wanted a mistress, and it left him at liberty to be absent as much as he chose, knowing that all was going on in due order at home. He was away more than ever, for he had grown to like a London life.

Of course, Sir Dene's frequent absences put absolute power into the hands of Lady Lydia, and she ruled despotically. She was rather more economical in housekeeping matters at these times than the servants liked: they whispered, one to another, a great deal of the liberal sum allowed by Sir Dene went into her own pocket: which was quite true. Little Tom had hard times of it during these intervals. If it happened that Sir Dene was away during the Christmas or Midsummer

holidays, Tom felt the loss severely. Scarcely ever was he allowed to dine at the same table as his cousins, but was banished to Doveton's room, and took his meals there. The children, naturally taking their cue from their mother, had despised him from the very day of their arrival, not looking upon him as one of the same order as themselves, but as an inferior and dependant ; and the feeling grew and strengthened. Even in the matter of dress he was not as they were. Jarvis and Otto's old clothes were mended up for him : what few new things had to be bought were of an inferior description. Sir Dene failed to see it, or to detect the wretched influence at work. If he noticed that Tom looked less well-dressed than the others, Lady Lydia would say, " Yes, because he spoiled his things so." In truth, Tom's clothes often came to grief ; but it was chiefly through Jarvis. Jarvis did not spare him. Somehow or other Tom was always in trouble, and the house in a commotion on account of his misdoings. Continual dropping will wear away a stone ; and the complaints of Tom's sins were so continual, that Sir Dene, sick and tired of it, grew hard upon the boy himself. Where's Tom ? he would sometimes say, missing him from the rest : and then Jarvis or his mother would narrate some bad tale of Tom, and my lady say she had banished him for punishment : which meant either that he was consigned to Doveton's society, or to his bed in the garret, or banished from the house to run anywhere. She grew to say that Tom's bad example would contaminate her children, and assured Sir Dene that he was the " greatest little liar " under the sun. Poor Tom, cowed, timid, sensitive, intensely generous, did not often defend himself : how could he when his words, truth though they bore, were flung back upon him by others ? And so Sir Dene grew to think less well of the boy, and to suffer the slighting treatment cast on him—not that he saw or suspected one-half the oppression. But he loved Tom still in his heart—far better than he would ever love Jarvis or Otto.

Tom's punishment over, he cried away the smarting pain, and finally cried himself to sleep. Gander came in and saw him crouched on the floor, the tears still wet on his poor little face.



"What's been the row this time?" familiarly demanded the butler.

"He has almost killed Master Otto!" was Doveton's comprehensive answer.

"Almost killed Master Otto?" repeated the startled Gander. "How on earth did he do that?"

"Master Otto was on the pony. He kicked out and shouted and started it on, malicious little wretch—and poor Master Otto was thrown."

"Why—what made him do it?"

"What makes him do other wicked things?" retorted Doveton.

"Did he do it?" said Gander.

"Did he? Don't I tell you he did?"

"Well—see here, Mrs. Doveton. There's always something or other being brought against the child—and I don't believe he is in fault one time in ten. Now, don't fly out like that: keep your tongue for others. One of these days I shall be telling the master how the child's put upon. As to malicious, that he never was."

"Suppose you mind your own business, and let other folk's alone," suggested Doveton, with composure.

"He's Mr. Geoffry again all over, that child is. *He* had no maliciousness about him; never had."

Doveton was silent.

"He's the very moral of his father," continued Gander, "save that he's a sight more timid and quiet—Mr. Geoffry never was that. The child has that from his mother. And a good thing too, or you'd have broken his spirit before this, among you."

The voice and step of Sir Dene in the passage outside arrested Gander. Sir Dene had come in by the back-entrance, and was walking straight to the housekeeper's room, a bunch of water-lilies in his hand.

"Put them into water, Doveton. Lady Lydia——"

He caught sight of Tom and stopped. The noise aroused the boy, and he stood up. Sir Dene saw something was wrong.

"He has nearly killed Master Otto, Sir Dene," spoke

Doveton, in explanation. "Leastways 'twas not his fault that he didn't. Little, mean, disreputable boy he is, I'm sure!"

At that moment Tom did look tolerably disreputable, his face dirty with rubbing and crying, his hair rumpled, his clothes dusty and untidy. Jarvis and Otto, hearing the entrance of Sir Dene, came trooping in, followed by Lady Lydia: and Sir Dene was made acquainted with Tom's iniquity.

"How came you to do such a thing?" demanded Sir Dene, sternly. "Suppose you had killed him?"

"I didn't do it, grandpapa," replied the child, his blue eyes raised to Sir Dene's. And those eyes, Geoffry's over again, never failed to make their own way with Sir Dene.

"You did not do it?" he said, more gently.

"Indeed I did not. I was by the fence, and I never stirred."

Jarvis fiercely interposed. He had *seen* it all, he said: seen the kick-out and the stone flung after Whitestar, and heard the hiss. As usual, it was word against word; Tom's feeble and tearful, Jarvey's bold and self-asserting. But for those earnest blue eyes that so brought back his dear son Geoffry, Sir Dene had not hesitated. He looked from one boy to the other—as Otto had done in Dene Hollow—and wavered. Sir Dene had his own reasons for thinking Jarvey might be mistaken. Mistaken; not wilfully false. The Lady Lydia did her best always in confidential moments to persuade Sir Dene that his eldest grandson was an upright little gentleman, next door to an angel.

"What have *you* to say about it, Otto?" asked Sir Dene. "Did Tom do this thing, or did he not?"

"I couldn't see, grandpapa. My head was turned towards the bank: and Tom was against the fence."

"Did you hear him hiss?"

"No, I was whistling."

"Or feel the stone?"

"No, and I didn't feel the stone. I think he must have flung the stone, or why should Whitestar have started? He wouldn't take fright at nothing."

Sir Dene did not feel so sure of that—remembering the particular spot it occurred in,

"You might have heard the hiss down at Hurst Leet," protested Jarvis. "You might have seen him fling the stone a mile off."

And then the babel nearly overpowered Sir Dene, and quite bewildered him. Lady Lydia said there *could* not be a doubt about it—Master Clanwaring had seen all this with his own eyes; furthermore she said that Tom had done it in revenge, because Otto had taken the pony when he wanted it himself. To have listened to her, Sir Dene might have thought there never existed so wicked a little lad on earth, as this waif of his favourite son's. Nevertheless, he believed the charge might have arisen from misapprehension, the pony not having been wilfully started. He knew also that boys, at the best, are mischievous, doing ill sometimes in very thoughtlessness.

"If I thought you had done this thing maliciously, Tom, I should flog you myself—and that I have never done yet," he said. "I can only believe that some action of yours, perhaps unintentional on your part, startled the pony. Beg Otto's pardon directly; and tell him you will be more careful for the future."

Never daring to maintain that he was innocent, Tom, his eyes overflowing, did what he was told, and begged Otto's pardon. The very fact of his doing it without demur convinced some of them that he was guilty. In a degree it convinced Sir Dene.

But, seated alone in the solitude of his own parlour, Sir Dene, weighing the matter in his mind, believed the pony might have started of its own accord. For he had grown, even he, to dislike that spot for horses.

Accident after accident had continued to take place upon it. The series, inaugurated by Sir Dene's own horses—the reader may remember the day he was being driven down the road by poor Geoffry—had culminated only a month or two ago in a very singular mishap indeed. How many there had been in the interval does not matter: several; but not one had been fatal. Drew the bailiff had partially recovered from his: he could go about in a hand-chair, and talk and laugh and take his meals as usual: and his had been the worst case.

The road, Dene Hollow, though so well-kept, was getting a bad name. People talked about its "Shadow" a great deal more than was pleasant to Sir Dene. Not that any shadow was ever seen there by human eyes; but the popular belief was that the shadow in some way existed at times, and that horses were startled by it. Sir Dene thought it the most ridiculous notion a sane parish had ever taken up: and no doubt the reader is thinking the same. The fact, however, was indisputable—and I am recording nothing but the truth—that horse after horse had started there in a mysterious manner: mysterious because there was apparently nothing to startle them. Twice over Sir Dene had had the road examined by officers connected with what was called the post-horse duty, lest any imperceptible flaw might be found on it—but nothing could be discovered. Whenever Sir Dene rode or drove up or down it now, he held his horses very carefully in hand; for though he utterly scouted the superstitious gossip around, he could not deny the fact that horses did come to grief there, frequently and unaccountably.

The last mishap may be recorded. A gentleman named Dickereen, living in Hurst Leet, died, and his remains were to be taken to a small village church, lying out beyond the Trailing Indian. The funeral was proceeding up Dene Hollow at the usual decorous pace, Hurst Leet bell tolling solemnly, and the village having turned out to watch the progress. A funeral, involving a hearse and mourning coaches from Worcester, with a black chariot in front for the parson in his surplice, and batons and mutes and feathers, was not an everyday occurrence in the rural district. As the hearse approached the ill-omened spot—the parson's chariot having passed on soberly—the four horses with one accord, as it seemed, suddenly attempted to turn round. The driver, scandalized at their behaviour, whipped them up; but the horses would not go on. And what precisely happened after that no one could afterwards tell, for all was over in a moment. There was noise and confusion: undertakers' men ran, drivers shouted: in the midst of it the hearse seemed to run up the bank with violence, the door flew open and the coffin was thrown out

But imagine the scandal to a sober funeral! What could have possessed the steady, slow-going horses to show signs of fear. It was never accounted for. The funeral was going uphill, not down. The astounded mourners got out of their coaches, the horses were quieted, and the attendants put the coffin back into the hearse again.

This was talked of far and wide, and Hurst Leet would tell you about it to this day. Even Sir Dene Clanwaring could no more explain the incident than he could deny it. And since then a hazy sort of impression had floated in his mind that there must be something there that did frighten horses, though invisible to man. Hence he believed that Otto's pony might have started without any help from little Tom or any one else.

These thoughts in his mind, Sir Dene, sitting in his room, sent for the child. He held Tom before his knee whilst he talked to him. First of all he gave him a lecture about telling untruths, saying that his papa, Geoffry, had never told any, and would be sure to have whipped Tom for doing it, if he were living. "And I'm sure *I* could not continue to love you," concluded Sir Dene.

With his little heart almost breaking at the sense of the injustice all seemed to deal out to him, the tears welling up in his blue eyes, Tom said again what he had said before: that he did not do anything to frighten the pony, or think of doing it. Sir Dene saw how earnestly the child spoke and noted the confiding look of the honest blue eyes that shone upon him through their tears. Never had he felt inclined to believe Tom more than now, especially with those accidents to other horses filling his thoughts.

"I could believe you from my heart, Tom, and understand it into the bargain, but for Jarvey. He says he *saw* you purposely frighten Whitestar."

Between his extreme sensitiveness for others' feelings, his generosity, and his innate timidity—which was increased tenfold by the daily thralldom—Tom was literally unable to say that Jarvis told falsehoods. This was only one instance out of many where Jarvey had accused him without any sort of reason, and he had never said to Sir Dene, "It is Jarvis who tells the stories, not I." Another thing may have helped to

deter him—the certainty that he should not be believed. Jarvis would make his own case good, and Lady Lydia turn the tables on him with a vengeance.

“I didn’t do it, grandpapa,” was all he repeated, catching his breath in pain.

“But you know you do tell stories, Tom.”

“No, I don’t, grandpapa,” sobbed the child. “Indeed, I never do.”

“Then Jarvey must have seen double—sees so often too,” cried Sir Dene, explosively—for somehow the answer carried truth with it. “Anyway, I believe you now. And there’s a shilling for you, Tom.”

But, as a rule, Sir Dene did not question the boy in private, and Jarvis received all the credit, he none. Wondering whether the pony had really been startled accountably—or unaccountably, after the fashion of the other horses—had caused Sir Dene to question now. It was the exception to the rule.

And it sometimes happened in the accusations brought against Tom, the tales told of him, that he would be partially in fault. In the escapades all three of the children shared—and the girl Louisa with them—Tom alone would be made out to have been to blame; he was always the scapegrace. If all were throwing stones and a window got broken—Tom was said to have done it; if the pigs were let out of the sty or the chickens out of their pens, it was Tom who had opened the door; when the miller’s little boy was pushed into the stream and nearly drowned, Tom was the culprit. Tom knew that he had, himself, done nothing of all this; but he had been with those who had, and no defence existed for him.

“A lie that is all a lie can be met with and fought outright,  
But a lie that is part of a truth is a harder matter to fight.”



## CHAPTER XX.

## MISS MAY.

A FIELD of new-mown hay lay open to the sun on the fair June morning. The day was yet early ; the haymakers sang at their work. Attended by her nurse, Susan Cole, came a child of some three years old, with a round, lovely face, and rich brown eyes that looked out frankly from their long lashes, curling upwards. She wore a large white sun-bonnet, after the fashion of the day, and was doing her best to scatter the hay about that the haymakers had just raked up : doing it quite in defiance of Susan Cole : for she was a very saucy and independent young lady, in constant hot water with the ruling powers.

“Miss May, I tell you those big haycocks are *not* to be disturbed to-day—giving double trouble to the haymakers. I never saw such a naughty little child in all my life.”

Miss May’s answer was to climb up one of the mounds and roll down on the other side, bringing the hay with her. There she sat, quite still, for a wonder. And stillness was so unusual an element in Miss May Arde, that Susan Cole stepped round to see what other mischief she might be in.

“Oh ! Well, I’m sure ! You audacious little girl !—pulling off your shoes and socks before the haymakers !”

For the young lady had been quietly divesting herself of these articles of social attire, that she might dance barefoot in the hay. Eluding Susan’s grasp with a laugh, she flew off and flung herself into the arms of little Tom Clanwaring, who happened to be running up. Little Tom, in point of fact, but big Tom in the young damsel’s eyes, his seven years, compared with her three, seeming to constitute a whole era.

Tom clasped the truant in his arms, and kissed her : they were the best of friends. Susan, bearing the little socks and bronze shoes, took forcible possession now and sat down on the field with the child on her lap. But the process of putting on socks and shoes again was a difficult matter. Laughing, struggling and fighting with Susan, was Miss May. Tom helped by tossing the socks over Susan’s head.

"Now, Master Tom, if you encourage her in her naughtiness, I'll ask my mistress not to let you come in here at all. She's the tiresomest little worry to-day that ever was, and you're old enough to tell her better. I never had half the trouble with you. Miss May, if you take your socks off as fast as I put them on, there'll be no end to it!"

At length, by dint of dexterous sleight of hand, Susan got on the socks and one shoe. While she was putting on the other, the young rebel tore it off—and tore off the strap that fastened it round the ankle. Susan saw the mishap with dismay.

"There! Now you have done it, Miss May! Your shoe won't keep on without the strap—and how am I to get you home? Of all audacious little plagues, you are the worst."

The "little plague"—Susan's attention momentarily absorbed by the damaged shoe—broke away, seized two armfuls of hay, and flung it over Tom. The children rolled on the ground together.

"Almost as good as a new pair," lamented Susan, regarding the shoes. "Missis 'll blame me, and say I might have taken better care. Tiresome monkey! I must go home for another shoe for her now. Master Tom, take care of Miss May while I run to the Hall and back."

And Susan, knowing that both children would be safe under the protection of the haymakers, familiar peasants of the district, departed on her errand.

You may be wondering who this child of three years old is—whose second name, Mary, was generally shortened into May. She was the child of George Arde and his present wife; the only child of the Hall. That frail blossom, the first Mary, the child of George Arde and Mary Owen, to whom the old Squire was wont to carry presents, and to whom he left the money, was no more. The delicate little creature, inheriting her mother's beauty and no doubt her mother's frail constitution, had pined away and died. The second Mrs. Arde did her best to nurse her into health, but it was not to be; God called her to Himself. Before this other child was born (destined to be the second Mrs. Arde's only one), the elder was lying by her mother's side in St. Peter's churchyard at

Worcester. Mary happened to be the second Mrs. Arde's name also, and it was one of the names given to her infant: Millicent Mary. They had fallen into the habit—especially Mr. Arde and Susan Cole—of calling that departed little one the first Mary. For this second Mary no fears were entertained on the point of health; she was well and strong. Susan was wont to say in reproachful moments that if she had only as little mischief in her as she had tendency to illness, she'd do.

Susan Cole's life had undergone a blight—she had been crossed in love; or so she described it when wishing to be confidential. But where the blight had fallen and how it had affected her, was not so clear; certainly it had affected neither her tongue nor her cheerful temper. That false journeyman at her father's forge had married another. At the very time that he was whispering love vows in Susan's ear, he was courting another at Worcester: and one fine morning he went off and married her. Cole the farrier told Susan she was well out of it; for the man—he had previously had to discharge him—had grown so drunken and idle that he was hardly worth his salt, and would not be likely to earn a living for any wife. Perhaps Susan, in her heart, thought the same, for she wasted no superfluous time in grief. It occurred just as she and the other servants were being dismissed from the Dene: the nurse at Arde Hall was leaving, and Susan stepped into the post.

Little Tom Clanwaring had been allowed to run in and out of the Hall since its new mistress came to it as freely as he did before. Mrs. Arde liked the boy, with his golden curls and his wonderful eyes that gazed so straightly and fearlessly into her own: she liked his gentle manners, his—at that early age—curiously strange consideration for others. No one had wept more bitterly for the little girl's death than Tom. It had pleased the child to have Tom very much with her: Mr. Arde allowed it: and perhaps the scenes of sickness, and Mr. Arde's grief, had made an impression on Tom that he would never lose.

That she had gone straight up to be an angel in heaven, no earthly power could have reasoned him out of. For days and weeks after her death, he would fancy he saw her robed in

white, a little harp of gold in her hand, and a crown upon her head, looking down at him from the skies. Tom—then between three and four years old—was taken to the funeral by Squire Arde : and Sir Dene had him put into mourning for his cousin. Lady Lydia, supremely indignant, would have thrown the things out of the window had she dared.

A month later, and the other little girl came to the Hall to replace the one lost. Tom had never seen anything so wonderful as this new baby. The reverence with which he would regard the infant, when allowed to hold her for a minute in his arms, seated safely on the carpet, was great and real. In his own mind he acquired a sort of proprietorship in her : and would far rather have died himself than suffered harm to come to the little child.

So that when, on this day, Susan told him to take care of her whilst she went home for another shoe, Tom was in the seventh heaven of delight. The field belonged to Squire Arde, and was within a stone's-throw of the Hall.

"May," began Tom, as Susan's footsteps died away, "I've a new picture-book that Grandmamma Owen bought for me. It's in my pocket."

May, with all her wild fun, was intensely fond of "picture-books." Down sat the children together at the foot of a haycock, the book held between them.

Like all books bought by Mrs. Owen for Tom, it had a religious tendency. Whilst the story itself was excellent, it insensibly led its young readers to higher and better thoughts. Such books are the very best that can be put into the hands of a child ; but there has been a singular dearth of them in these later years. There they sat : May asking questions about the "pictures," and Tom explaining to the best of his ability.

"Me wis me tould read !" exclaimed May, when, the pictures exhausted—the book only containing three—they had to fall back upon the story.

"I'll read it to you, May," said Tom.

With their heads bent over the book, Tom began. The progress was not satisfactory ; since at the end of every two lines, or so, Tom was called upon to say why this was, and why that. Suddenly a shadow fell upon the book. Up went

their heads, and nearly a whole haycock was flung in their faces. Not lightly, either; for the thrower was Jarvis Clanwaring. Absorbed in the book, and in each other, neither had seen him approaching. May broke into a loud cry of pain: the hay had struck her in the eye. Down went the book, and up jumped Tom.

"What did you do that for, Jarvis? You've hurt her."

"What did I do it for, you young rat! How dare *you* ask me what I did it for? Because I chose. There! Squalling little cat! She's not a bit hurt."

May, who hated Jarvis at all times, because she was afraid of him, began kicking out with all her little might as she sat, the tears falling from her smarting eyes.

"Make him go away, Tom! make him go away. Me tell mamma."

"You are to go away," said Tom, standing up bravely in defence of May. "You've no right to hurt her, Jarvis."

"She's not hurt—little toad."

Tom, his eye flashing fire (as his sweet-natured father's had flashed once or twice in his brief life), clenched his impotent small fist, and struck straight out and upwards at Mr. Jarvis's face, catching him between the eyes. The blow could not hurt very much; but it smarted a little, and all the more because it was unexpected. Jarvis, frantic with passion, pummelled Tom's face back again, and an unequal encounter ensued. May screamed with terror; and one of the women and Susan Cole rushed up together. Tom's nose was streaming with blood; Jarvis was apparently uninjured. But in that culminating moment he contrived to damage himself. Turning shortly upon his heel to confront the indignant Susan, he stumbled over a rake-handle that the woman had let fall, and cut his upper lip upon the rake's teeth. More blood: and May screamed more than ever. Susan caught up the child.

"How *dare* you get fighting, Master Tom—and when I left you to take care of Miss May!" demanded Susan, not caring to attack Jarvis in his present state of fury: for once, when she had interfered with him, he had kicked her rather seriously. "Well, I'm sure! We shall have a baby in arms, I suppose, standing up to fight next!"

"He called May names," said Tom, who could not restrain his tears between pain and excitement. "He hurt her in the eye."

"You confounded little blackguard!" cried Jarvis, trying to dodge up to Tom again with outstretched hand. "Do you suppose I shall ask your leave whether I call names or not? She is a toad. There!"

"She's not a toad, and you shan't call her one," retorted Tom. "You are a coward."

Further demonstration on Jarvis's part was stopped by his swallowing a tooth. A first tooth, almost ready to fall out before, and which the blow on the rake must have quite done for. Tom Clanwaring's instinct was a true one: Jarvis *was* a coward. Not only in the matter of bullying little girls and fighting boys less than himself, but in other matters. Swallowing the tooth sent him into a state of abject terror: he had heard a tale at school of some boy who had swallowed a tooth and died after it. Jarvis, suddenly remembering this, turned tail and rushed out of the hayfield the colour of chalk.

"You come on to the Hall, Master Tom, that your nose may be seen to," said Susan. "A nice pickle you're in! Enough to frighten the crows."

"A brave little gentleman, wi' all his pretty manners, that born son o' poor Master Geoffry's," commented the woman to the other haymakers when the fray was over. "As to the other, he's more of a 'Tartar than his mother."

Arde Hall was not imposing. A rather long, red-brick building, two storeys high, with narrow windows and a slated roof, facing the village. The old-fashioned portico opened upon a lawn intersected with flower-beds, on which bees and butterflies were sporting that sunny June day. Mrs. Arde—a nice-looking, but somewhat reserved and stately woman—fond of gardening, was tending her flowers in a sun-bonnet and pair of long gloves, talking the while to her husband, who sat at one of the open windows. Naturally they felt some surprise at the entrance of the procession: Susan carrying May, and Tom with a damaged face and bleeding nose. Susan opened at once upon his delinquencies—that he "up with his fist" and struck Master Clanwaring, and they had a fight.



"He called May names," said Tom, looking up fearlessly. "I couldn't help hitting him."

Squire Arde broke into laughter. "A knight-errant," said he; "taking up the cudgels for distressed damsels!"

"But what is the matter with May?" said Mrs. Arde, as she took up the still sobbing child.

"Oh, she's only frightened, ma'am," was Susan's slighting answer. "And enough to frighten her, to see the blood on the boy's face," concluded the girl, as she walked Tom off to the pump.

The lavatory process over, Tom ran off home, where the discomfited and frightened Jarvis had previously arrived. At this time, Mrs. Clanwaring, the wife of John the heir, was on a visit to Beechhurst Dene, with her daughter Margaret, her eldest boy, and two little twin sons, younger: so that just now the Dene seemed full of children. She was a good-natured and very pretty woman—her own fortune enabling her to indulge in luxuries that might not even be dreamed of by Lady Lydia. For instance, she had arrived with a lady's-maid and three nurses, and one man-servant who was called her own footman, the party having posted from town in two carriages-and-four. These things were looked upon as necessities by Mrs. Clanwaring, but she was herself quite unpretending, of simple tastes and manners. The two ladies were sitting together in that attractive room, the library, when Jarvis broke in upon them breathless and terrified. The boy was literally terror-stricken; his features were swollen with his insane endeavours to cough up the tooth coming along, his eyes rolled, his face was white: a deplorable figure altogether. Up jumped Lady Lydia with a scream, quite believing her darling was half killed, and began to hug him. Pretty Mrs. Clanwaring, in defiance of good manners, laughed a little.

The tale Jarvis told was as good as a play: no dramatic author ever drew more on his inventive powers. Tom was represented as a very monster of iniquity, who had attacked Jarvis with a rake, "on the sly," cut off his lip, and knocked all his teeth down his throat.

But that the teeth were still in his head, plainly visible

beneath the swollen upper lip *not* cut off, Lady Lydia, in her dismay, might have sent for the nearest doctor. The whole house was aroused. Basins of hot water were ordered; Lady Lydia, Doveton, and a dozen others bathing the injured lip with soft sponges. Under the assurances of my lady and Mrs. Clanwaring, that a solitary tooth, going down by accident, never killed people, but on the contrary was rather good for digestion, the gentleman was soothed into calmness. The disturbance had brought forth Sir Dene from his parlour, where he was engaged with accounts: he remained long enough to hear the woeful account of Tom's savage attack, and then went back again.

When Tom arrived home, shortly afterwards, Jarvis was lying on the sofa, his mouth tied up with a white handkerchief, and some delicious apricot jam by his side. Doveton met Tom in the hall.

"*You* have done a nice thing," cried she. "You've almost killed Master Clanwaring."

Full of consternation, Tom opened the library-door and went in timidly. He did not present any great appearance himself, for, in running home, his nose had begun to bleed again. The moment Jarvis saw him, he leaped off the sofa and gave him an ugly kick. Mrs. Clanwaring ran to the rescue and pushed Jarvis off: but the vicious malice that blazed in his eyes, she did not forget for years.

"Not in my presence, Jarvey. How can you attack a little fellow who is no match for you? It is perfectly wicked to kick any one in that savage way. I am afraid you are a coward."

"Why did he attack me in the hay-field?" retorted Jarvey. "I'll kill him if I can."

But Lady Lydia pounced on Tom and whirled him off with her. Roused by the sight of him, and by Mrs. Clanwaring's words, her fury at least equalled that of Jarvis. On the mahogany slab in the passage, leading to the side-entrance and Sir Dene's parlour, lay the boy's riding-whip. Seizing it, she struck Tom: not perceiving, perhaps not caring, that a young man not belonging to the house was at that moment turning out of the bay-parlour. Struck him anywhere: on

his shoulders, on his face, on his bare hands. Gander, propping his back against his pantry-door, stood looking on. As did the stranger, who was no other than William Owen, of Harebell Farm. The cuts were sharp and quick: Tom shrieked with pain, and it brought out Sir Dene. My lady ceased then; and Sir Dene pushed past William Owen.

"Wait!" cried Sir Dene in a voice of thunder, as she was making off with the child. "Wait, I say!" But Lady Lydia left the boy, threw down the whip, and disappeared. Sir Dene caused Tom to stand and confront him. His poor little face had a livid weal across it.

"Now, sir, tell me the truth. Did you strike Jarvis before he struck you?"

Up went the honest eyes, through their tears, with fearless truth, straight into Sir Dene's.

"Yes, grandpapa. I hit him first."

"Did you cut his mouth? And knock his tooth down his throat?"

"I suppose so. I didn't know."

"And what on earth tempted you to be so ferocious as to do all this?"

"He called May wicked names; he hurt her and frightened her. Susan had told me to take care of her while she went for another shoe."

Sir Dene bit his lips to prevent a smile. The same thought occurred to him that had come to George Arde—and amused him—this little lad of seven doing chivalrous battle. But he was frightfully annoyed at my Lady Lydia.

"Who hurt your nose?—and made it swell like that?"

"Jarvis did: he made it bleed. He hit me worse than I hit him."

"No doubt of it," commented Gander, from the kitchen-door.

"Well, you must have been a naughty boy, Tom; and Lady Lydia has punished you for it. Try and be good for the future—if you can."

Sir Dene turned into his parlour again; William Owen, although his interview was over, followed him in after a

moment's hesitation and shut the door. Gander retreated into his pantry.

Sobbing and hurt as he was, Tom ran off to the shelter of Harebell Farm. His heart was cruelly sore as he went up the stairs—for Mrs. Owen was keeping her chamber. Not sore at the thought of his weals and wounds, but at the injustice dealt out to him. Jarvis had been more of an offender than he, and was petted up with jam; *he* was taunted and whipped. Tom had been *inured* to this unjust treatment, but it struck him with pain to-day. [Mary Barber, coming out of her mistress's chamber on her way to make some dumplings for dinner, was quite struck at the sight of Tom.

"Mercy upon us!" cried she. "Why, what in the name o' goodness is the matter?"

Tom told his tale, leaning for protection—and it seemed to the child that he needed it—against Mrs. Owen. She had some warm water brought up, bathed his poor face and hands, spoke gently to him, and soothed his spirit; the tears falling from her own eyes, as she thought it might have been better had the poor little waif died with its mother.

"But that I think I shall not be long here, and that William seems bent upon not remaining in the place afterwards, I hardly know why, I would beg and pray of Sir Dene to let me have the child altogether," ran Mrs. Owen's thoughts.

As they had run, at odd times, for a long while now. Ever since the arrival of Lady Lydia, Mrs. Owen had clearly seen what the child's treatment was at the Dene, and the contempt he was held in. It was bad enough during these, his young years, when he could neither feel it very keenly nor attempt to rebel against it; what the result might be in later years, what complications and misfortunes it might bring about for the friendless child, she dreaded to think of. That Sir Dene would not be wilfully unjust to Geoffrey's son, she believed; but Sir Dene was a man who loved peace and quietness; ease also: he was given to believing implicitly what he was told, never searching beneath the surface of things; and he was already completely in the hands of his designing daughter-in-law.

His face smarting less, his grief over, and Mary Barber gone down to bake him a little cake, room was made for Tom on Mrs. Owen's sofa. He sat nestling against her, her arm round him, her pale face, so sweet and delicate, and telling of sorrow and suffering, bending towards his. Never did Mrs. Owen fail to improve these occasions in the manner she thought it right and best to do. In place of standing out for vengeance on Jarvis and others, as some might have counselled, she whispered of endurance, of forbearance, of persevering in the path of patience and truth, however much he might be tried, and of the ensuing of calm and holy peace. Trouble was certainly trying the child early; but she strove to show him, and to think, that it must be for the best. On some children these lessons might have borne no fruit; but Tom's natural disposition was so admirably adapted to receive them, that they did on his. There is no doubt—however the reader may feel inclined to ridicule this small portion of the narrative—that these lessons had a strangely good effect on Tom. They helped him to bear now, and tended to form his character for after years. But for them he would have been utterly miserable, might have sunk into a broken-spirited child, and, perhaps, become a veritable young Arab. Day after day did Mrs. Owen patiently labour at her work—for never a day passed but Tom was driven away from the Dene by some oppression or other, active or passive—and she would send him back with all the sweetness of his disposition renewed, ready to bear again.

“Was it wrong to hit Jarvis, when he called May those wicked words, grandmamma?”

Now here was a puzzle. Mrs. Owen privately rejoiced at Tom's spirit, but it was hardly consistent with the peaceful lessons she was inculcating to say so.

“Well, Tom, I—don't think in this case it was very wrong.”

“I wish he'd let me alone! I wish he wouldn't get grandpapa to believe bad things of me. Oh! you don't know how cruel it all is at home!”

A sobbing sigh, proving how sore his little heart was, followed the words. Mrs. Owen pressed him closer to her, and spoke in a whisper.

"My darling, I do know it. I know how cruel it is, and how hard it is to endure. God sees it all, Tom; never forget that, even in the worse moments. Bear on fearlessly in truth and honour, my boy; always striving to return good for evil, even to Jarvis, in patient, generous endurance; and trust all things to God. He will be sure to bring you comfort in the end."

Tom nodded with ready cheerfulness, as he had many and many a time before. There was a resolution in his little face, cast up just then to the summer sky.

"I will, grandmamma, I will. And papa is looking down to take care of me too, and so is mamma; they are with God's angels."

"Even so, my darling. Your best friends are in that better world where God is. I shall soon be there; and you will come to us in time. All these sufferings and trials are only making you ready for it."

And the tractable little fellow, gazing up at the blue sky, and picturing all kinds of radiant things beyond it, quite forgot present pain.

"Now, Master Tom!" called the sharp voice of Mary Barber from the foot of the stairs, "come down for your lard-cake. It has come out of the oven just beautiful."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### GIVING UP THE FARM.

"CAN you see any one, Sir Dene?"

"Who is it?" asked Sir Dene, turning round from his desk, that was placed before the window of his bay parlour. And he spoke in rather impatient tones, for he was busy writing letters, and did not care to be interrupted: as Gander knew.

"It's young Mr. Owen, of Harebell Farm," replied Gander.

"What does he want?" questioned Sir Dene. "Is it particular?"



"I don't know, sir," returned Gander. "He came to the door, and said could he see Sir Dene. I told him I'd come and ask."

"Show him in," said Sir Dene.

This colloquy occurred just about the time that Master Jarvis had been soothed to tranquillity on the sofa with some apricot jam at his elbow, as already described, and that the unlucky Tom was running home from Arde Hall. For the day is not yet over, and we must go back an hour or so in it; it is not possible for the cleverest author living to describe two series of events at once, although they may have taken place at one and the same moment of time.

William Owen appeared, shown in by Gander; and Sir Dene shook hands with him without rising, and motioned him to a chair. He always shook hands with his best tenants. As to any other recognition, or symptom of cordiality, William Owen did not receive it, and did not in the least expect it. Sir Dene had practically forgotten that there was any link between them, but that of landlord and tenant; the past connection might have absolutely faded out of his thoughts ere this, but for the existence of Geoffry and Maria's child.

The business that William Owen had come upon surprised Sir Dene; and he stared at the young man, seated before him in the opposite chair, while he listened to it. William Owen wished to transfer the lease of Harebell Farm to another tenant, if Sir Dene would permit it. Not at present, perhaps not for some time to come; but he wished to do it as soon as the time should arrive.

"As long as my mother lives, sir, I must stay where I am, for she would not like to leave the house; neither would I disturb her by asking it. But when she has left us—and she thinks herself it may not be long now—then I shall be glad to give it up, and leave the place altogether."

"What fault have you to find with the farm, Mr. Owen?" distantly queried Sir Dene.

"None, sir. The land is as good as ever I could wish to cultivate. That's not the reason."

"What is the reason, then?"

William Owen seemed at fault for a reply. Sir Dene

noticed that a look of pain sat on his refined and pleasant face.

"You must have some reason, Mr. Owen, for wishing to quit so excellent a farm."

"True, Sir Dene, I have. But it is one that is quite personal. I can't speak of it even to you, sir."

Sir Dene looked at him. There was the same contraction of pain in the face, the same tone of distress in the voice. He greatly wondered what could be the matter. William Owen saw the puzzled look, and just for a moment thought that he would speak out fully. But the impulse faded again in a feeling between shame and sensitiveness. Had Sir Dene been simply his landlord as he was of other tenants, and no more, perhaps the disclosure might have been made; but that past connection caused William Owen to be always reticent. In his sensitive nature, he would not have presumed in the slightest degree.

"I have no fault to find with the farm, sir, but I must leave it, for all that. I can't stay in it. And I should be glad to know beforehand that you will allow me to do this, that my mind may be at rest. As long as my mother lives, there I must be; but when she's gone, I shall go elsewhere."

"Do I understand that you will leave the neighbourhood altogether?"

"Yes, Sir Dene. And get as many miles from it as I can."

"What has it done to you?"

William Owen smoothed the nap of his white beaver hat with his hand; for he had dressed himself as a gentleman to hold this interview with Sir Dene—and he looked like one, too. He seemed to be considering what answer he could make to the question.

"It is just that—what it has done to me—that I am unable to tell, sir," he at length replied. "It is an unfortunate and painful affair altogether; and I cannot talk about it."

"Suppose I do not release you from the farm?" said Sir Dene. "What then?"

"But I hope you will do it, sir. As to what then, I'm sure I don't know what else I could do. Perhaps you'd allow me to underlet it."

"Are you going to give up farming?"

"Not at all, Sir Dene. I like the work : added to that, I don't know any other. I shall meet with a farm elsewhere : perhaps in Dorsetshire."

"You won't find a better than this one. If it's small, it's good."

"And I don't expect to, Sir Dene. If this becomes vacant, many a good tenant will be glad to take it up. Were it known that I thought of leaving it, they'd be over here to-morrow. But I'd rather no stir was made about it, sir : when the time comes I should like to be gone before it was known that I was leaving. That's why I am asking you to promise it to Philip Tillett when this time shall come : so that I may go out quietly and he come in. The farm could not have a better tenant than he."

Sir Dene knew that. A better tenant than William Owen himself, inasmuch as he was a man of more capital, and was a thoroughly good farmer.

"It seems to me that he will have to wait an indefinite time," remarked Sir Dene. "Mrs. Owen may get better."

"He is content to wait, sir, whether for weeks or years. The farm he is in belongs to his uncle, and he can leave it at any time. He likes his present one very well, but would like Harebell Farm better."

"Does he know why you are leaving?"

"Yes, sir, I told him. No one else knows ; not even my mother."

A short silence ensued. Sir Dene was thinking this a curious application, as in truth it was. William Owen, who held a long lease of Harebell Farm, was asking to be allowed to cede it to Mr. Philip Tillett on the death of his invalid mother. When she should die—and he acknowledged that it might be weeks or months, or it might be years first, for the doctors admitted this—then he wished to walk out of it, leaving Tillett to walk in.

"Would Tillett take to the stock?" abruptly questioned Sir Dene, when he had arrived at this point in his mental summary of events.

"To all things as they stand, sir ; household furniture

included," replied William Owen. "He knows the value of everything as well as I do, and is a just man. We shouldn't quarrel over that."

There was something in the young man's refined features and gentle manners that put Sir Dene in mind of poor Maria, as he had seen her that New Year's Eve in the Malvern lodgings. Had he wished to refuse this thing, he could not, with that remembrance upon him.

"Well," he said, rising, in intimation that the interview was over, "I will give my consent to this, Mr. Owen, though I wish you had freely told me your motive for leaving. Stay! Are you in any trouble? Is it that?"

"None whatever," was William Owen's reply, his sensitive face slightly flushing. "Circumstances over which I have no control, and could have none, are driving me away. I wish it had been otherwise."

"Then, until there shall be the last change in your mother, things go on as they are, and you remain my tenant?"

"Yes. And I sincerely thank you for your kindness, Sir Dene."

Sir Dene shook hands, and William Owen left; just in time, as the reader has heard, to see Lady Lydia horsewhip Tom. Hearing the commotion, Sir Dene walked out also. And when the affair was over, and he went back to the room, he found to his surprise that the young man had followed him. William Owen shut the door.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Dene, for presuming to interfere, but I should like to ask another favour. Let the poor little fellow come home to us. I'll bring him up and do for him as if he were my own."

Sir Dene's face flushed angrily. The request seemed to effect on the hospitality of Beechhurst Dene.

"Come home to you!" he exclaimed. "The boy's home is here, Mr. Owen."

"Yes, sir, I know. I am aware that Beechhurst Dene is a very different home from any I could hope to give him. But at least he would have justice and kindly treatment with us, Sir Dene."

"What is it you would imply?" asked Sir Dene, haughtily,

"I don't presume to imply anything, sir ; but what I know, I know. Hardly a day passes, but the child is insulted, put upon, very often beaten. Not by you ; not, I feel sure, within your knowledge ; but by those about you. The best is being done that can be done to break his heart and spirit."

In the gentlest tone possible spoke William Owen. Somehow Sir Dene felt disarmed. The child was Geoffry's child, and he did not like to hear of his heart or spirit being on the road to ruin.

"He has been very naughty at times of late ; and when he is so he must be corrected. The boy seems quite changed. Spare the rod, and spoil the child, you know."

"Sir Dene, I believe the child to be one of the very best children that ever lived : he is good and truthful as the day——"

"They say he has taken to telling stories," interrupted Sir Dene. "But I can't credit it."

"Sir Dene, believe me, he never does tell stories. What I fear is, that others tell them and lay it upon him. He is regarded as an interloper here, and treated accordingly. Not a servant in your house but could bear testimony to this if questioned, though they might not like to confess it. He is a truthful, honourable, upright little lad : I don't think he could tell a lie if bribed to it. Witness just now how he spoke up 'Yes,' when asked if he was the first to hit Jasper Clanwaring. The boy has no chance here. I wish you would let me have him, sir."

"It is out of the question," sharply replied Sir Dene, feeling vexed and annoyed at more things than one. And William Owen departed.

It has been said that close to the back premises the trees and shrubs grew almost like a wilderness. Branching off to the right, a path called the Privet Walk led round to the front ; while the path that led direct to Harebell Lane bore somewhat to the left. William Owen was taking the latter way, when he saw Squire Arde coming down the other. Mr. Arde made a sign, and William turned to meet him.

"Is Mrs. Owen worse ?" was the question asked. "I saw Priar hastening up your way just now."

"My mother? No; not worse than usual," was the answer. "He was not coming to our house, that I am aware of."

"Oh, well, I'm glad of that. I am afraid, though, that on the whole she is very ill."

"Yes, there's no doubt of that."

William Owen never attempted to ignore the social gap between himself and Squire Arde. Nevertheless, they liked each other, and were on intimate and confidential terms whenever they met. Standing together in the Privet Walk, the young man told Mr. Arde what his errand had been at Sir Dene's – the remarks on his mother's state of health perhaps inducing it.

"Tillett to take to the farm as it stands as soon as anything happens to her, and you to leave the neighbourhood!" repeated the Squire, in amazement. "Well, now, why is this, William Owen?"

And William Owen told him what he had not chosen to disclose to Sir Dene. And however the reader may feel inclined to ridicule the reason, he may not disbelieve the fact: for no other reason did William Owen leave Harebell Farm. Speaking in low tones, his pale face wearing its marks of pain, he breathed it into Mr. Arde's ear. The troubled spirit of his father, haunting the precincts of the farm, was driving him from it.

"He has been dead now seven years and some months, Squire: and people talked of its appearing for more than three of those years before I ever saw or believed it. Altogether I've seen it three times: the last was on Sunday night. News was brought to the farm that a poor houseless woman had crept into that shed on the two-acre meadow to die. I went off to see about it; and there, hovering in and around the grove, was the apparition, in the place in which I had seen it twice before. I saw it distinctly: it was a very light night."

Squire Arde remembered what a bright moon had shone on Sunday night. He was not a superstitious man, but nothing could be further from his thoughts than to meet this communication with contempt: others, worthy of credibility, had said just the same as William Owen.

"I can't make it out, William," he said. "Are you *sure*



your<sup>s</sup> eyesight was not deceived by some tree, or bush, or other object?"

The young man shook his head. "What I saw was undoubtedly the very figure and image of my father, looking as he used to look in life, wearing the same queer magpie cap he was drowned in; and his silver beard was never plainer. I was thinking of nothing but the woman in the shed, and what could be done with her at that time of night; and there, as I went along towards the grove, the figure stood facing me, in the moonlight."

"It is very singular!" exclaimed the Squire. "The queerest thing I ever met with in all my experience."

"Stay in the place I cannot," said William Owen. "It unnerves me for everything—though I should feel ashamed to acknowledge it to most people. The very moment my poor mother sets me at liberty by leaving me alone in the world, I shall depart. But for her sake, I'd leave to-morrow."

He had turned towards Harebell Lane, Mr. Arde strolling by his side. William Owen changed the subject to that of the child: mentioning the cruel chastisement he had witnessed, and what he had subsequently said to Sir Dene.

"When I shall be gone from the place, perhaps you'll give the poor lad a kind word now and then, Squire. No one else will do it. I should have liked to take him home to Harebell Farm; Sir Dene was very much offended at me for asking it."

"Lady Lydia and her children put upon him and thrust him into the background," remarked Mr. Arde. "She has a nasty temper of her own."

They parted; William Owen pursuing his way home, where he found Mary Barber making a cake for Tom: Mr. Arde entering the bay-parlour at Beechhurst Dene. Sir Dene Clanwaring was in one of his testy humours, and said a few fractious words about "Things going cross in the house."

"Young Owen has been taking it upon himself to tell me that the child—my boy Geoffry's son—is not well treated here!" he cried, in angry tones. "Fancy his assurance, Arde!"

"Then I'll take up the word for him, Sir Dene, at the risk

of your attributing assurance to me," spoke Mr. Arde, half laughing. "In this instance, at any rate, the child did not deserve chastisement—though I fancy some one else may. If that ill-natured young Jarvey came home with a false tale—as I conclude he did—it is he who ought to have had the whipping."

"What do you know about it, Arde?"

Mr. Arde related the truth of the day's fray—as he had heard it only now from his haymakers, in coming through the field; and, as he remarked, they were unbiassed witnesses. He spoke out far more freely than William Owen had ventured to do, telling a few home-truths about Tom and Jarvey, and the Dene in general, including Sir Dene himself. Sir Dene's blue eyes opened (in more senses than one), and his lips took a severe curve as he listened.

"A false, ill-conditioned young rascal!" spoke he of Jarvey. "It's the first time I ever knew a Clanwaring could concoct a deliberate lie."

"His mother is not a Clanwaring," observed Squire Arde, drily. And Sir Dene gave a sort of quiet assent to the remark.

"No, *he* has nothing of the Clanwaring about him at present," pursued the Squire. "Little Tom's one to the backbone: his father over again. They look upon the child as being in the way here, you see: don't let them quite break his spirit. They're trying their best to do it. There, that's all, Sir Dene. Good-morning."

Break his spirit! The same words that William Owen had used. Had Jarvey been there at that moment, Sir Dene might have half killed him. With the red flush dyeing his face, he strode forth to the presence of Lady Lydia. She was in the drawing-room.

Sir Dene controlled his temper, and spoke quietly. Quietly, but very peremptorily. He touched slightly upon the treatment of Tom by her and her children generally—the scandal he found it excited in the neighbourhood, the discomfort it brought to the Dene. And he said that for the future she had better take lodgings at Worcester during holiday time, and have her children there with her.

Lady Lydia's blood turned cold: was it *possible* that her

sway at the Dene was being imperilled? In her mind's confusion, in her angry passion, she did the worst thing she could have done—began to cast slurs on Tom and his birth.

"Were *her* darling children to be discarded for that low-born boy, whose mother——"

"Why, what the devil do you mean, madam?" interrupted Sir Dene, too much put out to weigh his words. "Low-born! You are speaking of my own grandson, Tom Clanwaring."

"He is not fit company for my boys, Sir Dene."

"If what I am told be true, they are not fit company for him," retorted Sir Dene. "You can take them out of it as soon as you please, my lady."

Her very lips turned white. Before this, she had believed she had acquired firm hold on Sir Dene. He looked like one not to be trifled with just now. An angry man, pacing the carpet.

"You—would—turn my children out for *him*?" she resumed, in subdued gasping tones, partly put on, partly the result of the low-lying fear. "Oh, Sir Dene!"

"My lady, it is this. The home is my grandson Tom's: it was his home before any of you came to it; it shall be his home as long as it remains mine. I was willing to let it be your children's also: but it seems the plan does not answer. It is my pleasure that Tom Clanwaring shall be honoured in this house, ay, and be loved too, at least as much as any one else is. Your children will not do this: they have taken up a prejudice against him; therefore there is only one alternative—they must spend their summer and winter holidays elsewhere."

No mistake now. He was in real earnest. My lady, smoothing her black hair from her pale face damp with emotion, changed her tactics on the instant. She would inquire into it, she meekly said; if Jarvis had been knowingly unkind to the child or told fibs of him, he should be punished. For her own part, she had always thought Tom quite a little angel. Children would fight, though; boys would be boys. But the little child should be her special charge for the future, now that she understood Sir Dene's wishes.

My lady gathered her three children into her room that

same evening to a private interview, and treated them to sundry tutorings with regard to Tom. Doveton also received some hints. The result was, that Tom found a change : there was no more open ill-treatment, no further complaints carried to Sir Dene. And, on Sir Dene's part, nothing else was said about the exodus.

But the lady's resolution had not changed : she only altered her tactics. As the time passed on, this little episode was forgotten by Sir Dene. Easy and good-natured to a fault was he ; Lady Lydia's sway over him when he was at Beechhurst Dene increased : during his frequent absences she reigned absolutely. And Tom Clanwaring was taught and trained to look upon himself as a dependent, kept there out of charity ; an interloper, but not a son, and Tom insensibly fell into these views and learned humility.

## PART THE SECOND.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### AFTER MANY YEARS.

YEARS have elapsed since the conclusion of the first part of this history : and those boys and girls have grown into men and women.

There is not very much to relate of the interval. Time has wrought some changes—as time invariably does, but they may be summed up in a few lines. And it may be as well to state that, in spite of the lapse of time, we are still writing of a period very many years gone by.

Sir Dene Clanwaring has lost both his sons : John the heir and Reginald the major. The one died of neglected cold ; the other fell in battle. Pretty Mrs. Clanwaring, John's widow, has married again, and lives chiefly at her husband's place in Scotland. Her two sons, Dene and Charles, pleasant young fellows, with plenty of money in prospect, and her only children living, very often stay with their grandfather, Sir Dene ; the elder of the two, Dene, being his heir. Their sister, Margaret, had died at Beechhurst Dene only two years ago, under circumstances of a painful nature : Sir Dene, who was very fond of her, has not been quite the same man since.

Lady Lydia Clanwaring is at Beechhurst Dene still. She has never, in fact, been away from it since that autumn night when she arrived to take up her abode there. Up to the time her husband died, she was always “going back to India shortly.” After his death, she had no home even to talk of going to, and

no means of establishing one—for she had nothing but her pension as a major's widow. So she remained at the Dene without any question as to her leaving it; and her children looked upon it as their home as surely as though they had a legal right to it. Lady Lydia had really grown useful to Sir Dene: and her tact was such that he valued her, and quite believed the household could not get on without her. Her daughter, Louisa, had married early; Jarvis was in the army; Otto was a barrister in Lincoln's Inn.

Tom Clanwaring had not been driven out of the Dene. The fact is worthy of being recorded, considering Lady Lydia's secret machinations to accomplish it. Never again had she worked for it openly since that one last great explosion, when Sir Dene had suggested that she and her children should leave, rather than Tom. Indeed, she soon gave up hoping for it, and let the fact alone. But she had successfully managed to put Tom in the background, and keep him there. Sir Dene insensibly fell into the snare; the neighbourhood fell into it; Tom himself fell into it. During his boyhood he was kept at school as much as possible; in the holidays he met with coldness and neglect; was estranged from the drawing-room, and found companionship where he might. It taught him humility. Sir Dene honoured and regarded him as his grandson just as much as he did the other boys; in his heart he loved Tom best of all; nevertheless, he tacitly sanctioned Tom's being put into the background: and it had now grown into a habit at the Dene.

When Tom Clanwaring grew to manhood, his occupation rendered this isolation from the rest easy of accomplishment. Tom was to the estate very much what his father had been: a sort of steward or overlooker. When the lad was driven to seeking resources out of doors, he found them on the land. With Dell the bailiff, riding or walking round; watching for poachers with Simmons the gamekeeper; following the plough to chat with the ploughman; sitting in a corner of the barn, eating his bread-and-cheese, whilst the men threshed the wheat; helping to load the waggon with barley: going to the corn-market at Worcester with Dell: in all places, and at all work, Tom was at home. There were few better practical farmers



in the county than he. It had not pleased Sir Dene to give him any profession : perhaps he had always intended to make him useful on the estate ; or perhaps he did not care to send Tom away from him. When Tom left school, Dell was in failing health ; and the lad at once took upon himself a portion of his duties, helping him all he could. It was only natural that on the bailiff's death two or three years afterwards, Tom should slip into the place. There had been no formal appointment by Sir Dene—as had been the case with Geoffry ; but Tom was bailiff to all intents and purposes.

The Lady Lydia, though not cordially approving, did not actively oppose this. There was no longer any motive for wishing to banish Tom Clanwaring. He had been effectually *put down*, and was too insignificant a person to trouble her : but the idea dimly crossed her mind, she could not tell why or wherefore, that it might be as well for him not to be overseer of the land. Perhaps she thought it might give him a hold on the place. Therefore she advised Sir Dene not to keep Tom at home, but rather give him some profession or occupation out in the world. For once Sir Dene did not listen to her. No one so fitted to be on the estate as Tom, he said : see how he had been robbed and imposed upon, especially since Dell had been less able to attend to business : Tom was, so to say, a born farmer, like poor Geoff ; his head was the right way on his shoulders, and he would care for things as poor Geoff had cared : who, he finally put it to my lady, was capable of looking after his interests in this way, Tom excepted ?

Who indeed ? She put it to herself, and the answer came—none. And yet, instinct seemed to foretell danger in Tom's becoming this permanent fixture on the estate. In vain she appealed to her two sons ; pointing out that it might be worth while for one of them to take this post rather than to toil upwards in their respective professions. Jarvis was simply astonished, somewhat as John the heir had been at a similar appeal once before. Jarvis stroked his black moustache in supercilious incredulity. *He* overlooker ; *he* take upon himself the office of bailiff ! He asked his mother whether she had lost her senses. Otto civilly replied that he knew nothing about land and its management, which was true enough, and

that his tastes and wishes lay in quite a different line of life. So Lady Lydia dropped the point, and Tom, unmolested, went on with his duties. He had nothing to do with the accounts ; Sir Dene had kept those himself for many years.

Thus, with all his work lying out of doors, it will readily be understood how easily Tom's estrangement from the family circle could be taken as a matter of course by Sir Dene. It was often one of convenience or necessity : and he would hastily take what he wanted in the housekeeper's room and be off again. Sundays excepted, Tom seldom troubled the family : if by chance he dressed and went in, he received cold looks and contemptuous silence for his welcome. His business with Sir Dene was transacted in the bay-parlour : the latter would sometimes say, " Can't you manage to be a bit more with them, Tom ? " And Tom never said why he could not. If Lady Lydia or Jarvis met him on the land, they passed him with the indifference accorded to any of the men. As to Tom himself, he had grown up to be just what his childhood promised : truthful, upright, generous : singularly modest, pleasing and patient ; altogether sterling. Mrs. Owen had lived long enough to do her work efficiently, and to see the excellent seed she had sown strike firm root in his heart and mind.

Harebell Farm had had another master for some years now. Mrs. Owen lay by her husband in Hurst Leet churchyard (though, if popular gossip might be believed, *he* did not lie there quietly, even yet), and William Owen had migrated into Dorsetshire. Philip Tillet occupied Harebell Farm. It was well known that Randy Black's vexation was excessive when he found the farm had been privately ceded to Mr. Tillet. Some friend of Black's, with a good amount of money and apparently a respectable character, had been looking out for it—for the fact that William Owen entertained thoughts of leaving had leaked out—and Black openly said it was a mean trick Sir Dene had served the neighbourhood. Mr. Tillet went into the farm, and told Black to his face that if he saw Robert Owen's ghost every night of his life, it would not drive him off it again. Nevertheless, in spite of his brave assertion, it was observed that Mr. Tillet did not put himself much in the way of the grove by the two-acre meadow after dark, which that super-

natural figure with the silver beard was wont to haunt in the moonlight. Not that there was any authentic or recorded history of its having been seen for some few years now.

It was a green, sunny Christmas, almost as warm as spring, and as the congregation turned out of Hurst Leet Church, they congratulated each other on the fine weather as much as on the festive day. Every one had walked to church: no need for carriages on such a day as this.

Every one excepting Sir Dene Clanwaring. Hale as of old, though his years had long passed those allotted as the age of man, a weakness in his limbs rendered much exertion of any kind extremely difficult. As he stepped from his pew, allowing most of the congregation to depart first, Lady Lydia held out her arm, and he took it. She counted more than fifty years now, but was tall and meagre as ever, looking the scarecrow she always did look, her face worn and sharp, her small black eyes strangely restless. But that it was very much the natural expression of her face, one might have said some inward torment troubled her. Sir Dene's pew had been full that day, for all his grandchildren had come to the Dene for Christmas, and might be seen, most of them, wending their homeward way beyond the churchyard.

Close by the pony-carriage stood a young, slender, gentlemanly man. His fair, fresh Saxon face, with its fine features and good-natured, deep blue eyes, was something strangely pleasant. Those who were old enough to remember Geoffry Clanwaring never needed to ask who it was, so great was the likeness. He had waited to assist his grandfather into the carriage and drive him home—as he had driven him in coming. But Lady Lydia turned about impatiently, looking for some one else to take him.

“Take care, Tom; the other leg up.”

“Shall I drive, sir?” asked Tom, when he had carefully placed him in: for, in his submission, he never presumed to put himself forward even to do a service, without first asking leave.

“Ay, do: my hands are cold.”

Lady Lydia interposed, and putting Tom aside, not rudely,

but with cool indifference, stepped in herself. He did not appear in the least resentful, but arranged her skirts under the warm rug with as much attention to her comfort as he had shown for Sir Dene.

"I was not aware you intended to drive yourself, Lady Lydia," he remarked, in a tone of apology.

"That will do," she said, cutting him short. "Give me the reins."

"No," cried Sir Dene, who retained all his old detestation of being driven by a woman; and would rather have had his grandson by his side. "Give them to me, Tom. I shall drive myself."

With a flourish of the whip, and a cheery nod to the few villagers who had stayed to watch the departure, Sir Dene drove on, Tom lifting his hat to Lady Lydia with a bright smile. Do not mistake him, or think this courtesy put on—as in truth it well might have been, all things considered: but the sweetness of Tom Clanwaring's nature was such, that he had kindly looks even for her. Sir Dene's progress was not a quick one: many acquaintances were waiting for a word or a handshake, and the pony was continually brought to a standstill. Tom's long legs were soon ahead of it; and he overtook two ladies: mother and daughter, as might be seen by the likeness: nice-looking women, with pretty features and delicate complexions: but the younger lady's face was pleasanter than her mother's.

"Mrs. Arde, I wish you a merry Christmas."

Mrs. Arde turned at the greeting. "Thank you, Tom. I wish you the same."

Her tone was not cordial; the best that could be said was that it was civil. Liking Tom in her heart as much as ever, a certain thought had startled her lately, and caused her to treat him very distantly; it might have been supposed that she was taking a lesson out of Lady Lydia Clanwaring's book. Miss Arde did not speak to Tom at all: but as she glanced up shyly, there shone a smile of welcome in her rich brown eyes, and the rose-bloom deepened on her dimpled cheeks.

Tom just touched her hand. "And a very merry Christmas to *you*, May," he said in low tones.

The little carriage came rattling up. "What has become of Arde that he was not at church to-day?" called out Sir Dene, as he checked the pony.

Mrs. Arde went round to his side. "I am sorry to say he is ill," she answered; "one of his bilious attacks. We left him in bed."

"In bed!" echoed Sir Dene. "That won't do at all, you know. We dine at five sharp. He must not fail us."

"I trust not. He hopes to be better by that time."

Lady Lydia's keen glances were taking in everything. Tom Clanwaring was talking to May Arde, and she noted that the young lady's eyes were cast down as she listened, and her face was flushed. My lady drew in her thin lips, not liking the signs any more than did Mrs. Arde. But at this moment there came up one from the opposite direction, who could always dispel the gloom on Lady Lydia's face—her eldest and best-beloved son.

Never were two people more alike than Jarvis Clanwaring and his mother. Tall, lean, dark, he had the same thin compressed lips, the same shifty black eyes. His black moustache was fierce, even for a soldier, very fierce indeed for those days when such an adornment was rare, and he had altogether a worn, dissipated air. But Captain Clanwaring was popular with his friends and the world. A serious illness had entailed a long leave of absence to recruit his health, and he passed his time agreeably between London and Beechhurst Dene.

"Jarvis," began Sir Dene, in peremptory tones, "why were you not at church to-day?"

"I overslept myself, sir."

"Overslept yourself! Well, I don't know. I asked after you half-an-hour before I came out, and Gander told me you were writing letters in your room. I choose that every one about me shall attend church on Christmas Day. I thought you knew that."

Jarvis Clanwaring slowly raised his hat in response, by way of cutting short the discussion. A keen observer—which Sir Dene was not, and never had been—might have detected covert scorn in the action. With a hearty adieu to the ladies, and telling them not to be late for dinner, Sir Dene drove on.

One little incident may be mentioned of the drive home. At the turning to the road, Dene Hollow, Sir Dene drew the right rein, and kept the pony on the straight road—the old round. “Oh, pray don’t go that way, Sir Dene!” interposed Lady Lydia fractiously, “I want to get home. Take the Hollow.” A shade of annoyance crossed Sir Dene’s face; but he complied, and let the pony take the way he had wished to avoid. Slowly he drove now, at a snail’s pace: gentle though the ascent was, Sir Dene Clanwaring had grown to dread Dene Hollow.

Meanwhile Jarvis and Tom Clanwaring continued to walk on with Mrs. and Miss Arde; all four in a line at first; but as they turned into the narrow path, the nearest way to Arde Hall, they had to separate: Mrs. Arde in front with Captain Clanwaring, Tom and May behind. Lady Lydia, bowling on in the direction of Beechhurst Dene, mentally saw the position as surely as Mrs. Arde saw it. It did not last long: at the entrance to the enclosed grove belonging to the Hall, the ladies wished the young men good-morning, and the latter went on.

Walking in silence. Captain Clanwaring never wasted superfluous words on Tom the scapegoat: Jarvis was twenty-seven now, Tom twenty-four. Tom’s intelligent eye was noting all points as they walked, with the quiet air of one who knows every inch of the land. The officer looked out straight before him, seeing nothing: buried in thought was he, and not pleasant thought. Thus they came in view of the rural lodge where Tom was born, and Maria, his pretty mother, had died. Simmons the gamekeeper lived in it now. Jarvis pointed to it with a wave of his hand.

“Go and tell Simmons I shall want him to go out with me early to-morrow morning. And to mind that he brings my own gun this time.”

There was supercilious command in every tone of the voice, every gesture of the raised hand. Tom Clanwaring, who had been taught to consider Jarvis and Otto as his masters, turned obediently. Half-way through the bare trees, he halted.

“*To-morrow* morning, Jarvis?”

“I said to-morrow morning. Didn’t you hear?”

“But to-morrow will be Sunday!”



"Well?"

"Sir Dene would not like it. Only think if he heard the guns!"

"I want none of your remarks, Tom Clanwaring. Do as you are told!"

And Tom went on.

Lady Lydia, bonnet and shawl thrown off, met her son in the hall when he entered. Grasping his arm, as one in pain or anger, she drew him to the fire—a large bright fire of wood playing in the hearth of the hall. Standing there, ostensibly warming her hands before going in to luncheon, she spoke eagerly and impressively; but so quietly that Gander, who happened to pass, never saw that her lips moved.

"Every hour of your existence you vex me, Jarvis! Why are you not more cautious? You fly in the face of Sir Dene's prejudices in the most reckless manner possible. To think that you should have stayed away from church to-day!"

"A man, worried as I am, has no fancy for church or for anything else," returned Captain Clanwaring in tones half-indifferent, half-sullen. "As to studying the old man's prejudices—whether I study them or whether I don't, it seems to come to the same thing: no money. Have you asked him again?"

"It isn't likely. Were I to enter upon business matters to-day, he would only stop me. Jarvis, indeed I don't think I shall be able to get it. I have had so much money from him for you that I am driven to my very wits' end to invent excuses for its use. I can't say it's for Louisa this time, because she's here, and he might question her himself: neither can I say it is for Otto, for the same reason. In these rare visits Otto pays us, I am kept in a state of chronic terror, lest the old man should speak to him and discover that he knows nothing of the sums of money he is supposed to have drawn. Otto was always so inconveniently truthful, you know."

"A close, steady-going muff. I know that."

"Try Dene again."

"No good, mother. He told me yesterday I had bled him once too often: and meant it too. The goose is killed in that quarter."

"Well, Jarvis, I only speak the truth when I tell you that I believe it will not be possible to get you this money. Sir Dene suspects, I think. He is not so cordial with you as he used to be—and you do nothing to conciliate him. Why were you not at hand to drive him to church and home again?"

"Because I didn't go myself," was the cool rejoinder. "I *must* have the money, and cannot do without it. It would bring ruin and double ruin upon me."

There was a pause. Captain Clanwaring lifted his shapely boot—in dress he was one of the greatest dandies going—and pushed back a falling log. His mother thought what a handsome leg and foot it was.

"Why don't you pay more attention to Mary Arde, Jarvis?"

"*Why* don't I! You must ask that question of herself, my lady. She is a vast deal more inclined to favour the scapegrace than me. I suspected it when I was down here last."

"Ridiculous!" replied Lady Lydia, her tone one of passionate irritation. "That is perfectly absurd, Jarvis; and you know it. *He* marry Mary Arde! The very idea is an outrage on social decency."

"I know that she likes him. And that she does not like me."

"Don't talk so loud. I tell you you might as well accuse her of a liking for her father's bailiff as for Tom Clanwaring. What is he but a bailiff? You—— What do you say, Jones?" broke off Lady Lydia, as a servant came out of the dining-room, and spoke.

"Luncheon is waiting, my lady; and Sir Dene is asking for you."

Lady Lydia gave a final rub to her hands over the blaze, and went into the dining-room. But when the man said "Luncheon is waiting," he used a figure of speech. Sir Dene never waited luncheon for any one, and he had nearly finished now. The table appeared to be crowded, but Lady Lydia's place was vacant. Dene the heir sat at it and his brother Charles, pleasant-looking, slight young fellows, hardly out of their teens. Otto was there; a dark, short man of twenty-six, steady-looking enough to have worn his wig out of court as well as in it.

Louisa, the wife of Colonel Letsom, and her three children, Sir Dene's great-grandchildren, completed the party. Captain Clanwaring looked about for a seat.

"You young ones must sit closer together," remarked Lady Lydia, in rather cross tones, for she could not bear her favourite son to be put out in the smallest degree. "They might have taken their luncheon upstairs, Louisa, as they are to dine with us. Make room for your uncle Jarvis."

"You can have my seat, Jarvis," interposed Sir Dene, rising and taking up his stick to leave the room. As Jarvis sat down, ill-humoured as usual, he said something about hoping the dinner-table would not be as crowded, for it was possible one or two of *his* friends might drop in.

"The dinner-table is always large enough when we know how many are to sit down to it," said Lady Lydia. "Of course it will be full to-day. In case of an unexpected guest arriving late, Tom Clanwaring must dine below."

"I'll be shot if he shall!" exclaimed young Dene, with all the authority of the heir. "It is Christmas Day, Aunt Lydia, and Tom shall have his place here for once, as well as the rest of us. It's not often he gets it."

Lady Lydia, cutting some cake, cut it so sharply that the plate nearly broke in two. Dene began again: he and Charles both liked Tom.

"No. If Tom's place at table is filled up to-day, he shall have mine. It would never do for *him* to be absent. What would Mary Arde say?"

Dene threw out this little shaft mischievously; he had his suspicions of many things, and privately hoped Tom would in some magical manner win May, rather than cross-grained Jarvis. My lady's cheek turned a shade greener; and it is a positive fact that in moments of annoyance her complexion looked green. At this juncture, in came Tom.

No one moved, no one made room for him. Dene began ordering the children to sit closer, "two of you on a chair," but Tom settled the matter by lifting one of them, taking the chair himself, and putting the child on his knee. It was impossible for children to help loving Tom Clanwaring.

"Did you see Simmons—and give him my message?"

demanded Captain Clanwaring of Tom, without the superfluous courtesy of looking at him

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“I’ll tell you by-and-by, Jarvis.”

## CHAPTER II.

### REPENTANCE.

SIR DENE CLANWARING passed a good deal of his time now in his chamber, or in the small sitting-room next to it; a very different man from what he once was. Since he had been unable to take long walks in the open air, but was much confined to his chair or sofa, there was less easy indifference in his manner, more silent care. Advancing years and infirmities brought serious thought in their train; and events had helped it on.

Strange though it may seem to have to say it, stranger still to believe it, it is nevertheless true; a great remorse, repentance, regret—call it what you will—had come to Sir Dene Clanwaring. And for what? For having made the road, Dene Hollow. In the years we have passed over, and of which no record has been taken, accidents had continued to occur occasionally; and cautious people preferred to take the old way, rather than use the new. But in all the mishaps that had taken place, only one had been fatal; and that was to Sir Dene’s fondly loved granddaughter Margaret Clanwaring. A conviction seized him that the death of this fair young girl was nothing more than a retribution sent direct from heaven on himself.

Sir Dene had surely sent the widow Barber to her grave earlier than she would otherwise have gone; he had grown to realise the fact very clearly, and it came home to him in these later years with singular remorse. He never spoke of it; but its shadow lay ever on his mind—just as the other Shadow was said to lie at times on the unlucky road. The poor widow was

more often in his thoughts than he would have cared to confess ; not as he had first known her, the hale, red-cheeked little woman stirring actively amidst her milk-pails with her more than seventy years upon her ; but as he had happened to meet her a few days before she died, hollow-faced, sad-eyed, wasted to a shadow. Sir Dene remembered that he had turned to look after her in some doubt, debating whether that worn woman could be Mrs. Barber.

Bending forward from his arm-chair in the room above, on this Christmas afternoon, his hands clasped on the top of his stick, his blue coat off and a loose one on, sat Sir Dene, thinking of this, and of some other things that annoyed him, though in a lesser degree. Lady Lydia came in to disturb him. Lady Lydia was wont to boast in a quiet way of her influence over Sir Dene ; that she could “turn him round her little finger.” In truth, he yielded very much to her sway, for he hated contention, and loved to be at ease more than ever. The wish to get Tom Clanwaring away from the Dene, in abeyance for so many years, had sprung up anew of late in my lady’s heart ; the interests of her dear son, Jarvis, were rendering Tom’s absence from the place, as she believed, imperatively necessary. Jarvis must secure May Arde and her twenty thousand pounds to get him out of his terrible embarrassments ; it would never do for Tom to stand in the way of this. There was no fear of Tom’s *marrying* Miss Arde ; their relative positions forbade that ; but Tom was a remarkably good-looking young fellow (though it went against the grain for my lady to acknowledge that fact), and he and May seemed to be on the best of terms with each other. If she took an idea into her head that she liked Tom, she might—why, yes she might—reject Jarvis. To guard against this, Tom must leave the neighbourhood ; and not continue to see more of May while he stayed in it than could be helped. Turning these things about in her mind, Lady Lydia quite determined, as a preliminary, that Tom should not sit down to dinner with them that Christmas evening when May would be present, if any clever scheming of her own could prevent it.

Stirring Sir Dene’s fire into a blaze, she took a chair opposite him, and began upon a subject that was sure to excite Sir

Dene's ire—poaching and poachers, who had given more trouble on the estate this winter than ever before. Night after night these marauders came about in the most audacious manner, and had never once been caught. Randy Black was suspected to be the ringleader; and Sir Dene had gone so far as to cause the Trailing Indian to be searched; but no game was found there. In talking of it now, Sir Dene, as usual, grew excited, and said this should be done, and the other should be done; my lady agreeing in all, and suggesting measures on her own score. Thus the afternoon wore away.

After luncheon, Captain Clanwaring had gone out somewhere, returning home about half-past four o'clock. Tom Clanwaring was standing by the hall fire when he came in, and took the opportunity of telling him that Simmons refused to attend him on the morrow.

"What the devil do you mean?—or does he mean?" demanded the captain.

"What he said was this: that he wouldn't go out shooting on a Sunday for any one, neither would Sir Dene allow it. You cannot expect the man to do it," added Tom. "Putting other considerations aside, it would never do for the guns to be heard in the woods on a Sunday."

Jarvis swore a little—at Tom for his gratuitous opinion, and at things in general. Saying that he would soon teach Simmons what it was to disobey *him*, he strode off with a furious step; and just then, down came my Lady Lydia from Sir Dene's room. Advancing to Tom, she told him it was Sir Dene's pleasure that he and the gamekeeper should be on the watch that night in the oak coppice.

Tom Clanwaring verily thought she must be saying it in joke. Gander had not lighted up, and as he scanned her face by the firelight, he inquired whether she was not mistaken.

"Not in the least," she decisively replied. "Something has come to Sir Dene's knowledge about the poachers having laid fresh snares in the oak coppice—and has put him out more than anything. This evening, when all the world are supposed to be indoors, making merry, will be their opportunity, he says; and you and Simmons are to go at once on the watch. With



all the haste you can make you and he will not reach the oak coppice too early. There's not a minute to be lost."

"But Sir Dene does not wish me to go before dinner?" cried Tom, wondering more and more. For Sir Dene was a man who not only enjoyed Christmas fare heartily himself, but chose that all about him should enjoy it also.

"Sir Dene wishes you and expects you to go at once," was the emphatic rejoinder. "It has not come yet, I hope, to your disobeying him."

"I have never disobeyed him, Lady Lydia, or wished to do so," was the young man's answer, as he turned to the staircase. "I am ready to obey his wishes now and always."

My lady stopped him with a peremptory question.

"What do you want upstairs?"

"To change my coat."

She glanced at Tom's clothes, that sat so well on his graceful figure: and mentally allowed that they were not quite the things to go a-watching in.

"Take care that you don't disturb Sir Dene," she crossly said. "He is trying to get a little nap before dinner."

Tom nodded and ran lightly up. But just as he was passing his grandfather's door, Sir Dene opened it and saw him.

"Is that you, Tom? What's the time?"

"It wants about twenty minutes to five, sir."

"Is it so late as that? Come in and help me to get my coat on. We shall have Arde here. I begin to think sometimes, Tom," added the old man, as they crossed the sitting-room to his bed-chamber, "that I shall be reduced to the effeminacy of taking a valet in my old age. My own legs and arms won't serve me much longer."

"Make a valet of me, sir. You might let me help you more than I do."

"I don't like to give in, Tom; that's it; and I have waited on myself all my life. Sit down at the fire whilst I wash my hands; you can put the water out for me. You are ready yourself, I see."

"Ready for what, sir?" asked the young man, not quite understanding."

"Ready for what? Why, for dinner,"

"But I—I can't dine to-day, sir," said Tom impulsively.

Sir Dene took his hands out of the water, and turned round to stare at Tom.

"Why can't you dine?"

"There's no time, sir. I am going on the watch with Simmons at once."

"What for? Where to?"

"The oak coppice. As you desire."

"Going on the watch with Simmons!" repeated Sir Dene, a great wonder on his fine old face. "On the watch on a Christmas night! No, no, my boy; no one belonging to me does that. What put such a thing in your head?"

"Lady Lydia has just told me——" Tom Clanwaring stopped. He was a true gentleman at heart; ay, and a true Christian, too, though some in the world, reading this, may laugh at it. Not even in this case, barefaced though he at once saw it was, would he take his own part at the expense of others. But Sir Dene was looking at him, and he resumed.

"That is, I understood Lady Lydia to say you wished me to go with Simmons this evening. Perhaps she misunderstood you."

"You must have misunderstood between you. Send my people on the watch on a Christmas night!" reiterated Sir Dene. "I'm not a heathen, Tom."

"Lady Lydia talks of fresh gins in the oak coppice. What have you heard, sir?"

"What I've heard will keep, Tom. She ought not to have begun about it to-day, knowing it is a subject that worries me. *She* heard it; I didn't. Jarvis picked it up somewhere out of doors, she says. Any way, it must be left until Monday. There: let it drop. See if you can give my hair a brush. I must have got a touch of rheumatism in this arm, Tom; it's painful since the morning. Driving home from church did me no good. Priar talks of strained muscles—but I fancy it's rheumatism."

Tom had brushed the white hair and helped on the coat, when there came a smart knock at the door, and Lady Lydia entered. Sir Dene at once began about the misunderstanding, telling her she ought to have known better than to suppose

he should allow any of his people, whether grandchildren or retainers, to go out on the watch on a Christmas night.

Tom Clanwaring left the room: of no use waiting to assist his grandfather downstairs: my lady took care that Tom should never assist him in any way when she could help it. Scarcely had he gained the hall when he heard himself called. My lady was following him; her face white with anger, her restless eyes blazing with pride.

"How *dare* you carry tales to Sir Dene?" she hissed—and really her harsh voice was often very like a hiss. "You! a dependant, a serpent—for that's what you are—*you* presume to interfere and try to set aside my orders—and Sir Dene's!"

"You are mistaken, Lady Lydia. I did not intentionally——"

"Be silent, sir; I will hear no lying excuses from you. As you are afraid of a little night cold for yourself and Simmons, you may go and share his hearth with him this evening. You don't dine in my presence. One of us must be absent from the table; you or I."

"Very well, Lady Lydia. I will not intrude upon you."

He went straight out at the front-door. Really with no special intention, but in the moment's vexation. Generous though he was, submissive as he had been trained to be, he could feel anger at times when the oppression or injustice was unusually great. And Mary Arde would be at the table that he was turned from!

Would she? A few paces from the door he encountered a footman. Tom recognised him in the twilight for one of the servants at the Hall.

"What is it, Mark?"

"My mistress has sent me up with this note, sir. The Squire's quite unable to come out this evening. They are very sorry it should have happened so."

"Are none of them coming? Not Mrs. or Miss Arde?"

"No, sir; they intend to dine quietly at home," was the man's reply, as he went on with the note.

"I'll go and ask them to give me some dinner," quoth Tom to himself, his blue eyes brightening with an amused smile. "All happens for the best."

Whether the love existing between Tom Clanwaring and

May Arde—for it is useless to disguise this ill-omened fact any longer—would have sprung up had they been always on the original terms of intimacy, cannot be told. Perhaps not : the liking for each other might have continued as more like that of brother and sister. Not that Miss May had ever pretended to be fond of Tom : she had teased him at will, like the capricious little damsel she was. When May was growing up, Mrs. Arde had a serious illness, and the doctors ordered her abroad. She went with her husband and daughter, and they were away nearly three years. Three years will make great changes in people's looks as well as in other things. Tom was three-and-twenty when they met again ; May nineteen ; she saw a most attractive man, tall, strong, and noble ; he a sedate, modest young lady, with a shy, sweet face. That first interview sealed their fate. From that time they were as passionately in love with each other as ever man and woman in this world can be. Never a word of it had been spoken by either. Tom Clanwaring, remembering his position, was of too honourable a nature for that : but each knew quite well how it was with the other. There was about as much chance that Tom, poor and without prospect, would be allowed to win her, as there was that he might win the moon. Each was contented to leave the future to itself : as long as they met daily, or almost daily, the present held sufficient bliss for them.

And so, this last year, since May's return, things had gone on quietly and happily. That they would not go on so much longer, certain signs were betraying. Matters seemed to be approaching a crisis in more ways than one. Captain Jarvis Clanwaring was getting into deep water—was in it, indeed—and there appeared to be no way of extricating him but by some grand *coup-de-main* ; such as espousing an heiress. The heiress was at hand, and a very charming and lovable heiress, too ; and Jarvis Clanwaring made no end of visits to Beechhurst Dene on her account. But there was one curious fact about it—he did not seem to make much way with her. To Lady Lydia this had been utterly unaccountable until quite recently—when the horrible fear had suddenly suggested itself that May loved the despised dependant, Tom Clanwaring. Somehow Mrs. Arde was falling into the same fear : possibly

it had been craftily awakened by Lady Lydia, for we rarely see these things for ourselves. Mrs. Arde was not at all sure about it, and thought it almost impossible that May could be so great an idiot.

Tom, laughing outright at the turn affairs had taken that evening, walked on to the Hall. *He* knew quite well, if no one else did, that my lady's motive for banishing him from the dinner-table was because Miss Arde was to be present. But, for once in a rare way, Tom had won and my lady had lost. Tom knew that the renewed persecution, the undercurrent at work to banish him from Beechhurst Dene, arose from my lady's fear that he was standing in the way of Jarvis. He could afford to laugh, he thought: whatever the result as to himself, he felt assured that May would never have anything to say to Jarvis Clanwaring.

When Mr. Arde had found in the afternoon that he grew no better, dinner was hastily prepared at home; his wife and daughter declining to leave him. He frequently had these bilious attacks, and would look as sallow as a guinea whilst they lasted, which was sometimes three days. Mrs. Arde wrote the note to Beechhurst Dene, and sent to ask the Miss Dickereens to come in and dine with them at the Hall: two middle-aged neighbours, cheerful and talkative; who were made all the more welcome because they had lost the greater part of their fortune. The party was in the act of sitting down to dinner, Mr. Arde included, when Tom walked in. Every one looked surprised: May blushed scarlet.

"Will you give me some dinner, sir?"

"Certainly," returned the Squire. "And welcome. Anything the matter at the Dene?"

"I have offended Lady Lydia—no unusual thing, you know, sir—and she forbade me to sit down with them. I thought—as it was Christmas-Day—perhaps you and Mrs. Arde would take me in."

He spoke in half-jesting, half-serious tones. A servant placed a chair next to May: the Miss Dickereens sitting opposite, in the warmth of the fire. The Squire's spirits went up: Tom's good-looking face and kindly nature seemed to impart a new element of cheerfulness to them all. George

Arde had always liked him from the time he held the unconscious infant in his arms beside the bed where its mother lay cold and dead, and poor Geoffry sat grief-stricken in a chair against the wall. His head seemed to grow better as if by magic, and he soon felt as well as ever he had felt in his life. These impromptu meetings are often more successful than premeditated ones. You remember the remark of the good old Vicar of Wakefield in reference to their last-recorded merry meeting: "I don't know whether we had more wit amongst us than usual, but we had certainly more laughter." The laughter at the Squire's table that night was of the same description. Every countenance was happy, every heart at rest: even Mrs. Arde forgot her doubts, and yielded to the genial influence of the moment.

"What was the matter at home this time?" asked Mary of Tom confidentially, when they had a moment to themselves at the end of the drawing-room. "Did my lady really forbid your sitting down to table?"

"She said that either she or I must be absent from it. Of course it left me no choice, May."

"But why?"

"Well, the ostensible reason was that I had carried tales to my grandfather—which of course I had not done. The real reason was, that she did not want me to be present to-night."

"But why?" again questioned Mary.

"Well, she—she had her own reasons, I conclude," was Tom's not very satisfactory answer, a smile playing about his mouth.

Did Mary guess the reason? Faintly, perhaps, for her face wore a blush.

"Tom," she half whispered, glancing up under the long brown eyelashes, "I can't bear Lady Lydia."

"Now that's what I call ingratitude," was his laughing answer. "She says she *adores* you."

"Does she! But if I were you, Tom, I wouldn't really quarrel with her. She might banish you in reality. I know she's trying her utmost to do it."

"I know it myself, and I sometimes think she'll succeed."

"Would you like to go away?"



"Well—no. I would rather stay where I am : on account of my good old grandfather."

Had it been to save his life, he could not have helped the expression that momentarily escaped his blue eyes meeting hers. It plainly said that there was some one else also he would like to stay for ; and Mary's heart fluttered in its sense of happiness.

"What are you thinking about, child ?" asked Mr. Arde of his daughter, when their guests had departed, and he was lighting the bed candles.

For Mary seemed buried in a profound reverie, out of which she awoke with a start.

"I was thinking, papa, how very happy we have been to-night ; and wondering if anything could ever look cloudy again."

Meanwhile dinner and the evening had progressed at Beechhurst Dene. Not so merrily. Sir Dene was out of sorts ; the children were troublesome, and allowed to take up nearly all the attention—a very mistaken and unpleasant thing at all times to every one except themselves and their unwise mother. The friends Captain Clanwaring had said might drop in, did so ; two of them coming over from Worcester in a gig. Both were, as Jones, helping Gander to wait, expressed it, "millingtary." The one, Major Fife, was at least fifty years of age : and there was something about his height and uprightness, his clearly-cut features, ay, and more than all, in the long, flowing silver beard he wore, that put Sir Dene strongly in mind of Robert Owen, dead nearly five-and-twenty years before. Gander was so struck with the likeness as to be excessively discomposed, for it brought to the man's remembrance that long-past night of terror in Harebell Lane. The resemblance was certainly remarkable ; but the expression of the two faces was wholly different : for whilst Robert Owen's had been good and winning, Major Fife's was that of a roué. Sir Dene had heard of him as a hard drinker and player ; in short, as bearing not too reputable a character in any way, especially since he had left the army. The other, Lieutenant Paget, seemed an inoffensive, rather simple young man. But Sir Dene was not pleased that Jarvis should have introduced these men to his table that evening ; not caring that absolute strangers should

join the family dinner on Christmas-Day. He was of course courteous to them, as in duty bound to be ; but his manner had no cordiality in it, and he was very silent. That, or the absence of the Ardes, or something else, undoubtedly threw a gloom over the meeting. They were half through dinner before Sir Dene noticed the absence of his favourite grandson.

“Where’s Tom?” he exclaimed

No one answered. He repeated the question loudly and sharply. Lady Lydia could no longer affect not to hear.

“Oh, Tom? He has gone over to Simmons’s, I believe,” she carelessly said.

Sir Dene laid down his knife and fork. “To Simmons’s!” he repeated, every feature of his still fine countenance hardening to stern expression. “What has taken him there on Christmas night?”

“His low tastes, I conclude,” was her hardy reply. “He has a liking for such company, you know, Sir Dene.”

“If he has, my lady, it is thanks to you, for it was you who first drove him to frequent it,” was Sir Dene’s retort. Nevertheless he felt bitterly vexed at Tom, for absenting himself from dinner on Christmas-Day.

Nothing more was said then. In the drawing-room Lady Lydia took occasion to speak a few words in Sir Dene’s ear, intimating that it was *Tom* who had wanted to go and watch in the oak coppice ; that disappointed at not spending the hours with Simmons, whose company he preferred, he had gone off to his home. Sir Dene, angry and vexed, went to bed in the belief. He was not feeling well that evening, and disappeared even before the children.

A slight incident occurred to Tom Clanwaring as he came home, which may as well be recorded. Hurst Leet clock was striking eleven when he turned in at the Dene gates : the air was clear, though not cold enough for what is called seasonable Christmas weather, and the strokes fell distinctly upon Tom’s ear. Rather to his surprise, as he neared the house, he saw a gig standing before the front-door. One of their own grooms was in it, apparently asleep.

“What’s this for, James?” he asked of the man.

“It belongs to two gents come over from Ooster to dinner,

sir," replied the groom, waking up. "Friends of the captain's, Gander says. And I wish they'd come out," he added partly to himself. "Perched up in this gig for an hour or two isn't work for a Christmas night."

"When all the rest are making themselves comfortable," said Tom, with good-humour.

"Ay, sir," returned the groom, with intense aggravation. "There they be, a roomful of men and maids, drinking hot punch round the fire; and Gander telling his stories about Injee."

The picture of comfort was so vivid that Tom would not disturb it. Intensely considerate for others, was Tom Clanwaring. Instead of ringing a peal at the hall-bell that must have brought forth Gander or one of the others, he turned towards the back-door, which was never fastened until the last thing, and was just emerging from the Privet Walk, when a tall young person, with a profusion of light curls under her bonnet, came in his way. It was Miss Emma Geach—whom we have not met since she was a child.

"Why, Emma!" exclaimed Tom. "Is it you? Do you want anything?"

"Hush!" she said, sinking her voice to a whisper. "I was only waiting to—to speak to one of the servants, Mr. Tom."

"Which of them?" he asked. "Shall I call——"

"Don't call anybody," she quickly interrupted, as if the proposition startled her. "Go on your way and take no notice of me please, Mr. Tom. If he comes out, I shall see him; if he doesn't, I shall just run back home without it."

The sound of whispering penetrated the grove of trees at a few paces distance: and Dene Clanwaring and his cousin Otto strolling about to smoke, looked out to reconnoitre. Emma Geach drew behind the privet-hedge, and Tom went on to the drawing-room.

Jarvis, his two friends, and Lady Lydia were playing whist when Tom entered, looking—they could but notice it—unusually radiant.

"I hope you have enjoyed your evening with Simmons!" sarcastically spoke Mrs. Letsom. Like Sir Dene, she had

thought it very bad taste, even of Tom, to abandon the home party.

"With Simmons!" cried Tom, in surprise. "I have not been with Simmons, Mrs. Letsom."

"No! Well, I thought it curious that you should go there on a Christmas night," she rejoined. "Where have you been, then, Tom?"

"Dining at the Hall."

"Where?" asked Lady Lydia, in shrill tones of consternation.

"I have been dining with the Ardes, Lady Lydia, and a right merry evening we've had. The Miss Dickereens were there."

Grave as a judge was his face as he told it; never a ghost of a smile did it wear, to betray that he knew what the announcement must be to her. She made no answer; only bit her quivering lips. The captain threw down his cards, as if something had stung him, and his eyes wore an evil look as he turned them full on Tom Clanwaring.

### CHAPTER III.

#### MOTHER AND SON.

It was Monday morning, and the week seemed to be inaugurating itself rather gloomily for some of the inmates of Beechhurst Dene, if the countenances of my Lady Lydia and Captain Clanwaring might be taken as a criterion. Gloomy enough was the aspect of each, in all conscience. My lady was sitting a little away from the library window in the shadow of the green brocade curtain. The room was as charming as it had always been; renewed from time to time, its prevailing features and colour were always retained.

Gazing on outer things as one who sees them not, was Captain Clanwaring. A suspicion of frost lay on the grass of the park, the trees looked bare and bleak. He had been telling Lady Lydia once again that he *must* have money, and

immediately; and she returned him the same answer—that she knew not how it could possibly be obtained. In truth, he had more need of it than even his mother knew—for he did not tell her of various little items that were pressing him amidst greater ones. They were passing through his own mind as he stood there. Major Fife's visit on Christmas Day, over and above partaking of a good dinner, was to press Jarvis for a certain debt of honour, lost to him in London. The major had journeyed from London to Worcester to get it; and was staying at the Hop Pole. Jarvis was owing some money to the Trailing Indian, and that was pressing also. Miss Emma Geach's appearance in the Privet Walk on Christmas night was, in point of fact, owing to this, and she was waiting in the hope of seeing Captain Clanwaring—in spite of her plausible excuse to Tom. About these two items of debt he said nothing to my lady: but rather enlarged on certain claims he owed in town, and the terrible embarrassment they brought him. Which was only too true.

Jarvis Clanwaring was one of those men who cannot, or will not, keep out of debt. His tastes and pursuits were of a nature that must inevitably bring debt in their train to a poor man—ay, and to a rich one also. As to curbing his inclinations—his horses, fine clothes, dinners, betting and gambling—such a course never entered his mind. Of what good having a grandfather who possessed pots of money laid by, unless you made use of him, the captain was in the habit of arguing with his friends. Only he was in need of help: young Dene and Charley had money enough of their own. Otto made what he earned at his profession do for him, did not spend a fraction more, and troubled nobody. Jarvis's private opinion was, that Otto must live upon five shillings a day; and perhaps he did so. Close, prudent, hard-working Otto Clanwaring was one to make both ends meet, however small his income might be. Jarvis had once got twenty pounds out of him. Driving down to Old Square one day in a friend's curricie, Jarvis had told a tale of some temporary need for twenty pounds; and Otto let him have it, relying on his promise to return it that day week. "Sly dog, Otto; putting by already," was Jarvis's comment—and he had never

repaid the money from that day to this. Otto had left off asking him for it. Jarvis had money from young Dene more than once; "bled him," he called it. Dene had grown wary now, and refused to lend another stiver: he was not yet of age, and had only his allowance. In short, all sources seemed closed to Jarvis, except Sir Dene. Sir Dene had helped him so much in response to open applications, that he would lend no more. In point of fact, he had helped him far more than he suspected, through the contrivances of Lady Lydia. That lady would obtain money from Sir Dene—ostensibly for herself, for Otto, for Mrs. Letsom. It was always for one or the other, as she told Sir Dene: whereas, in point of fact, every coin went into the yawning pockets of Jarvis. There seemed to be no end to it, Sir Dene had recently told her; and added that he strongly suspected she must be assisting her elder son in secret. So my lady might well assure the captain that for the present she was unable to do more. It was not at all a brilliant state of affairs, and they tacitly acknowledged it to each other, that wintry morning.

"Jarvis, it is as I have told you," said Lady Lydia. "You must make way with Mary Arde."

"And don't I do it—and mean to do it?" fractiously retorted Jarvis; who was just as undutiful to his mother, as it is the pleasure of some of these idolized sons to be. "I shall go in for her now in earnest."

"Of the twenty thousand pounds that will be hers on her wedding-day, ten of it will be settled on her; ten will go to her husband, if he be a man they like. Mrs. Arde told me so much. Some of that ten thousand will set you straight."

Set him straight! Ay. Jarvis Clanwaring drew a deep breath, and his face looked less gloomy as he thought of it. The mines of Golconda could hardly have seemed fairer and richer.

"Twenty thousand pounds on her wedding-day, and a provision for life besides," continued Lady Lydia. "Of course Mary will come in for the Hall as well, and for the whole of her father's fortune. A prize worth winning, Jarvis."

Yes. Jarvis felt it to his heart's core: and he liked Mary besides. A prize worth any sacrifice.



"I shall not let her slip, you may rest assured," he said aloud. "But, don't you see that I must contrive to go on until that time comes? Were my embarrassments to leak out, old Arde might fight shy of me."

She did see it: and looking up at Jarvis, she told him so.

"Well, then, for that reason, if for no other, I must have money."

"It is all very well to say 'must,' Jarvis. But how?"

He turned from the window in some agitation, lifting his hand to emphasize his words.

"Mother! as surely as that you and I are talking here together, if I do not obtain money between now and this day week, some inconvenient things will come out to the world. I cannot put it more forcibly."

"What things?"

"What things! Why, obligations that I have incurred. Liabilities. Debts."

"You have been frightfully imprudent, Jarvis."

"A man of the world is obliged to be so," carelessly remarked the captain. "But a steady-going dromedary like old Arde might not allow that, and I don't think he would. Once let him get an inkling of the state of my exchequer, and I fancy he would cut up rough."

"He and Mrs. Arde both like you, Jarvis. She especially does."

"And to retain their liking, I must keep my name clear. Don't you see it?"

Oh, yes again, she saw it; saw it in all its truth and force as she sat there in silence, biting her compressed lips.

"No excuse that I can invent would weigh with Sir Dene, Jarvis. It is not a fortnight since I had money from him ostensibly for myself: and I cannot say it is for Louisa or Otto whilst they are both here. There's no other way. He has taken to settling the housekeeping bills himself—through Gander."

"Gander be smothered!" said the captain, gloomily, straying a little beside the mark. "You will have to say it is for me."

"It would not avail," she quickly answered. "At least—I don't think it would. He told me to my face that he believed

the last money was for you, and it was high time your extravagance was checked. Jarvis, I think this—if you don't mind, he will be warning Squire Arde himself."

"No!" muttered Jarvis, aghast at the suggestion.

"Well, I fear so. It is just an idea of mine. I must have time to think this over, Jarvis."

Captain Clanwaring, stretched himself, and strolled away, leaving her to her meditation. Half-way across the room he turned to say something.

"There's the second trouble—that cursed scapegrace. He must be got away somehow or other. Dining at the Hall on Christmas-Day; drinking tea there yesterday—it won't do, you know. He and May were coolly pacing the Beech Avenue together for an hour in the afternoon. The idea of there being anything between them is preposterous; too contemptible to speak of: he would never dare to lift his eyes to her, nor would she stoop to him: nevertheless, he will be better out of the way than in it." Jarvis reasoned exactly as my lady reasoned, you see, for their instincts were similar.

"Leave that to me," was the careless, yet assured answer. "I have it in hand."

And well in hand, too.

Jarvis, filling his pipe, lighted it, and strolled out at the side-door, his hands in his pockets. A more miserable mood than his could not well be imagined. It was absolutely necessary that he should have money, to avoid—well, he hardly knew *what*. Exposure, for one thing. If my lady failed in getting this money for him, he would be reduced to the necessity of selling his commission.

Brooding over these troubles, he had strolled as far as the gate opening to Harebell Lane, and was leaning his arms upon it, puffing away, when Tom Clanwaring came up the lane with a quick step. The contrast presented by the two was remarkable; Jarvis, an idle, lounging, smoking, dissipated dandy; Tom, fresh, active, upright, striding along in his worn velveteen coat and splashed top-boots, as though he had all the work of the parish upon him, his fair Saxon face bright and beautiful to look upon. The one was a worker, the other something worse than a dreamer.

"I'm not sure but we shall have snow," said Tom cordially, as he went by.

"Snow—ah!" responded Jarvis, indifferently. "Do you happen to be going past the Trailing Indian?"

"No. Why?" continued Tom, halting.

"I wanted a note left there. For Black."

"A note—for Black!" echoed Tom, in surprise: wondering what Randy Black and the fastidious captain could have in common.

"About tobacco," Jarvis condescended to explain. "Can you take it for me?"

"Yes, if you like: it won't be much out of my way," responded Tom, with his usual cheerful good-nature. Jarvis produced the note from his pocket, and Tom went on.

Sir Dene had kept his bed all day on the Sunday, with rheumatism in his shoulder, and Mr. Priar came up to see him. Tom went in twice, and was coldly received: Sir Dene, who had not been enlightened as to the truth, retained his anger at Tom's having gone, as he thought, to Simmons's instead of dining at home. He was too angry to reproach him: for one thing, his shoulder was in great pain, and my lady had been throwing in a little edged shaft or two against Tom.

To-day, Monday, Tom was very busy out of doors. His post as overlooker was the great barrier Lady Lydia had to contend with in her resolution to drive him off the estate. Remembering the instinct that had hazily warned her against his thus remaining, she thought how true it had been. The arrangement had worked well hitherto, widely separating the poor scapegoat from his kith and kin: and but for this awakened fear in connection with Squire Arde's daughter, Tom Clanwaring might have stayed on as he was, unmolested, until Doomsday.

"Don't make quite so much noise, Emma. Please don't, there's a good girl!"

"If thee goes on with that clatter, I'll throw this brush at thy head. D'ye hear, wench?"

The pleading appeal came from Mrs. Black; the threat from her husband, who caught up a short hearth-brush lying

inside the fender, as he spoke. They were sitting on either side of the kitchen fire, objects to look upon. Poor Mrs. Black, a helpless cripple now—indeed, the extraordinary wonder was that she had lived so long—looked a mere shadow rather than a woman; her small, meek face, with its perpetual glances of terror, weary, shrunken, pitiful. In point of condition, Black did not look much better than his wife: he also was worn almost to a shadow: though he had not been robust at the best of times. His countenance had acquired an anxious, uneasy expression, and his eyes a restlessness, as if he were always waiting for some unpleasant surprise. People accounted for it curiously: they said Black lived in constant fear of seeing Robert Owen, and was tormented by the fear. Just now Black was really ill: a week ago he had been taken ill with pneumonia, necessitating Mr. Priar's attendance, and was in some danger. The danger had passed: he could sit up: but was more cross-grained and irritable than when in his usual health. And that need not have been!

The reputation of the Trailing Indian and its landlord had not materially improved with the course of years. The mysterious trade in smuggled and stolen goods, midnight hearses, and the like, had dwindled away; but more poaching was carried on than ever. Somewhat perhaps of smuggling still; for nowhere else could be found such brandy and tobacco as Black's. The men who had helped in the other work had died off one by one; Michael Geach, the last of them, some five or six years ago. As to Mrs. Geach, at a remote period she disappeared altogether from English society, and was supposed to be in Australia. And Miss Emma had remained as a permanent legacy at the Trailing Indian: Mrs. Black treating her kindly, Black generally swearing at her.

Emma Geach had grown up what she promised to be: a fine, very good-looking girl, as impudent as she was tall. Her fair face and profusion of light hair, which was really beautiful, gained for her much outspoken admiration from the frequenters of the Trailing Indian, which was sometimes conveyed in broad language. Emma Geach took the admiration as her due, and for the rest responded in kind. Never backward was she at retort; no matter what its nature, she was equal to it. A bold

girl, undoubtedly, by instinct as well as from circumstance, and the neighbourhood did not speak too well of her. Not that any absolute charge had been brought against her until quite recently, when gossip had begun to say that there was cause for scandal, and respectability picked up its skirts as it passed her in the road. A laughing, bustling, capable young woman as to household matters, was she, quite the right-hand of the Trailing Indian, and doing more work in an hour than poor Mrs. Black had ever accomplished in a day.

But she was always noisy with it. This morning—washing up the Sunday plates and dishes—which she had chosen to defer until the Monday—she made noise enough for half a dozen; one might have supposed the crockery was being everlastingly broken.

“I shall have done soon,” was all the notice she took of the remonstrances given her; and went on with as little regard to peace as ever. Her cotton gown was pinned up under the coarse apron, her arms were bare, but her very light eyes glistened with almost unnatural brightness, and her hair, as just said, was abundant and beautiful. Miss Emma was proud of it; and though not always particularly neat in her attire, her hair was invariably dressed in the pink of perfection.

“Has Priar sent up that physic?” demanded Black, after a fit of coughing.

“Not that I have seen,” replied Emma.

“Then go down and fetch it.”

“As soon as these things are in the rack,” said Emma, with ready acquiescence—for she liked going out better than any other recreation in the world.

At this moment in came Tom Clanwaring, bringing the note to Black. Tom was, so to say, quite at home with the inmates of the Trailing Indian, and would often run in to say a kind word to poor, suffering Mrs. Black, or have a chat with Emma. The acquaintanceship, begun in the old days, had never ceased. Tom the child, taught to look upon himself as an irredeemable vagabond by my lady, saw little difference between himself and the other vagabond, Emma Geach. He learned better later, but was far too good-hearted to entirely ignore Miss Emma. Tom liked the girl very well, and

occasionally had done her a good turn in shielding her from Black's furious passions. Emma liked him too; what was more, she respected him—and that's saying a very great deal for impudent Emma Geach. Black on his side, from some cause or other, had been always tolerably civil to Tom, and was rarely surly with him as he would be with other people.

"I've brought you a note, Black," Tom said. "Captain Clanwaring asked me if I'd leave it with you."

Black's lean fingers grasped the note as if it were something precious; and Emma Geach gave him a sharp, inquiring look from her light eyes. Tom sat down on the table to speak to Mrs. Black.

"Wait till he comes down from Lunnun again!—not if I know it," broke forth Black, when he had torn open the note and read the few lines it contained. "It's the money I want, and the money I'll have. Promises won't do; folks know what *his* be, and I know. Mr. Tom Clanwaring, you——"

"Does Captain Clanwaring owe you anything for tobacco?" interrupted Tom, wondering at the man's excitement.

"Well—yes, he does owe it me; it is for baccy," rejoined Black, after a pause, and a hard stare at Tom. "He comes here when he's down at the Dene, saying he can't get baccy like mine all over Lunnun, and runs up a heavy bill—and 'stead of handing me the money, sends excuses and these here notes."

"I thought the note had been to order some," returned Tom. "He said something about getting no tobacco like yours, when he gave it me."

"The note is to say he can't pay me the money he promised to bring up here Christmas Eve," said Black, deliberately and savagely. "You tell him, Mr. Tom Clanwaring, as I say——"

"I cannot carry back any message concerning it," interrupted Tom, not choosing to interfere in Jarvis's debts. "Captain Clanwaring saw me coming up this way, and asked if I'd leave the note; but you must send your answer yourself, Black."

Black growled some indistinct words under his breath—wheezy and short to-day. "When's the captain going back to Lunnun?" he asked aloud.



"Not yet, I fancy. In two or three weeks, perhaps."

"And in two or three days I hope to be on my out-door legs again, and I'll be on to him. Captain Clanwaring ain't going to play with Randy Black. He needn't think to——"

Black's menace was cut short by the entrance of some customers demanding ale: a shooting party, sporting in the neighbourhood. They came trooping into the kitchen with their guns: Otto Clanwaring and his cousin Dene amongst the foremost, Simmons bringing up the rear. Tom laughed, jumped off the table, exchanged a few words with his relatives, and went off on his morning's business.

"Be thee going for that physic?" savagely demanded Black of the girl, as his customers disappeared; for their entrance and exit had brought in a rush of cold air, and set him coughing again.

"I'm going now," she answered, as she put her last dish into the rack.

In a coarse red shawl—or "whittle," as it was then called—and a smart bonnet, Emma Geach started. It was she who did all the errands, for no ostler was kept at the place since the death of the man Joe, who had been there so long. If by chance a stray horseman rode up to the inn, Black himself attended to the steed. Miss Emma was not accustomed to hurrying herself when on these errands; and Black often felt inclined to strike her for the delay. It made not the smallest difference—if she chose to stay out, she stayed out.

Hastening down Harebell Lane, she came to a sudden halt at Beechhurst Dene gate. Captain Clanwaring was leaning over it still. Reviewing gloomily his difficulties, financial and otherwise, he had never moved from the place.

"Where are you off to?" asked he, taking the pipe from his mouth.

"He's sent me down to old Priar's for his physic," replied the girl, her naturally free tone becoming almost timid.

Jarvis looked at her. The light eyes, generally glittering with a hard, peculiar brightness, had taken a soft, pleading look the cheeks were rosy with a delicate flush. Never had Emma Geach looked prettier than at this moment.

"He's in a fine rage," said the girl. "The night before last, nothing would do but I must go up to his bed-room—he'd heard me come in, and shrieked for me like mad. When I stood it out that I'd not seen you because of visitors at the Dene, and so couldn't deliver his message, he roared out that 'twas a lie."

"I've sent him up a note," said Jarvis.

"It has done no good," said the girl. "He swears he'll have the money whether you've got it or no: said it before Tom Clanwaring."

Jarvis, who had begun to puff at his pipe to keep it alight, glanced up with a start. "Before Tom Clanwaring! Black's a fool."

"No harm done," returned the girl. "Was it money owing for baccy, said Mr. Tom, thinking the letter was only to order some. Yes, 'twas money for baccy, says Black, and Tom Clanwaring took it all in. Good-bye," added Miss Emma, suddenly, as the voice of Philip Tillett, the tenant of Harebell Farm, was heard on the other side his hedge, talking with one of his labourers: "Good-bye." And she went on hurriedly. Jarvis Clanwaring sauntered indoors, finishing his pipe. Lady Lydia, writing a letter in the library, when he entered inquired whether he had been to Arde Hall.

"No," returned Jarvis, in his most sullen manner.

"But I thought you were going there this morning, Jarvis."

"Time enough."

"Listen, Jarvis: you must be very attentive to Mary Arde if you are to win her," returned Lady Lydia in as urgent a tone as woman can well use. "Don't waste time—don't waste the shadow of a chance. Go down at once and call there."

It was not bad advice. Captain Clanwaring, brushing himself up a little, to look more of a fascinating dandy than ever, started.

Alas for human hopes! Miss Mary Arde descried the approaching visitor from a window, and made a precipitate retreat to her own room. Mr. and Mrs. Arde were out, and her maid came up to summon her. It was Susan Cole still, but Susan grown into a middle-aged woman

"Captain Clanwaring, Miss May."

"I can't go down to him, Susan," said Miss May, colouring violently. "I won't go."

"But I said you were at home," remonstrated Susan. "He's waiting in the drawing-room. You must go, Miss May."

"I will not go," persisted the young lady, as fond of her own way as she had been as a child. "Let him come again when mamma's at home."

Susan stood in a dilemma. "What excuse can I make, Miss May, after saying you were at home."

"Say anything you like," carelessly returned May.

"It's bad behaviour," debated Susan. "I can't tell him you *won't* come down."

"Say I am not well. Now go, Susan."

"Miss May, he'll know it's nothing but an excuse."

May laughed pleasantly, and rather hoped he would.

"I'm 'sure I can't think of anything to say," obstinately persisted Susan.

"Say I've got mumps, Susan. My compliments to Captain Clanwaring, and I'm sorry not to be able to see him; but I have an attack of mumps."

## CHAPTER IV.

### MISS EMMA GEACH.

THERE was discord at Beechhurst Dene. Christmas week is generally regarded as intended to be sociably festive; but at Beechhurst Dene it was proving especially unpleasant. The days, as they went on, were full of discomfort; each day more unpleasant than the last. Lady Lydia seemed to be doing her work well—that of banishing Tom Clanwaring from the house: and not only from the house and neighbourhood, but out of the country. To this end she was devoting her whole energies. Circumstances favoured her somewhat remarkably, as will presently be seen: they were to favour her yet more ere the week should be out. Dissension reigned: the whole household

against Tom, and Tom against the household. Insults were put upon him that stung him into retort. Charges were brought against him, trifling in themselves, but magnified by the manner in which they were repeated to Sir Dene; and in these might lie just sufficient truth to render them hard to disprove. Graver charges were soon to be whispered—and Tom might not have been able to refute them, even had the opportunity been given him. But it was not given him.

Sir Dene was keeping his room. Full of pain both mental and physical, he was more irritable than he had ever been known to be. His anger against Tom for having absented himself and gone to Simmons's (as he was led to believe) on Christmas evening rankled within him. He felt too vexed, too proud, it may be said, to speak of it to Tom: and Tom, knowing nothing, and suspecting nothing, could not, of course, refute it. Be very sure Lady Lydia did not—and therefore the false impression remained with Sir Dene. The new feeling against Tom was augmented by these other charges: they rankled in Sir Dene's mind also: and hence the discomfort recorded above. Never for a moment was Tom allowed to be alone with Sir Dene: Lady Lydia with her specious contrivance managed that—and no one suspected there was any contrivance in it; Tom least of all.

One day Tom was stung into retaliation; was insolent to Lady Lydia; retorted on Captain Clanwaring; took something like an independent tone with his grandfather. The lion within him was roused at last; the patient enduring of years gave way before a moment's anger. It was his grandfather's changed manner that stung him into this—not the insults of the others, for which he cared little. Had Sir Dene brought any specific charge against him, Tom could have answered it quietly: but nothing of the sort was done; and all the young man knew and saw was, that his grandfather had at length turned against him, out of, as it seemed, mere caprice. But the grievous state of worry in which this disturbed condition of things kept Sir Dene can be better imagined than described.

The private arrangements Lady Lydia had been engaged in succeeded. They were now ready to be acted upon; and she disclosed the matter to Sir Dene. She had been negoti-

ating with some of her relatives in Ireland, and had procured Tom an appointment to manage a large estate over there. It was really a good post of its kind, and the salary would be sufficient. To a young man seeking an opening in life it certainly was an opportunity not often to be met with.

Nevertheless, Sir Dene turned a deaf ear to it. The mere idea of Tom's leaving Beechhurst Dene startled him.

"I shouldn't like it, my lady," was his short, imperative answer. And his tone betrayed that he felt resentment rather than gratitude towards her.

She was not to be put down, and pointed out how excellent was the chance, how fitted Tom was for the post, how great the returning peace his departure would bring to the Dene. She had even found a man able and willing to replace Tom on the estate—one Mr. Weston; a humble cousin of the Miss Dickereens, who would be glad of the appointment.

But Sir Dene altogether negatived it. Dining at the game-keeper's on Christmas Day, and turning on the household since when they quarrelled with him, did not constitute sufficient offence to entail banishment, he said. Lady Lydia sighed and bit her lip, mentally telling herself that she must yet have a little patience, but that in the end Tom should go. Little did even she think how very soon it would be.

There's an old axiom to the effect that people rarely accomplish any great amount of evil alone. Two certainly can do more harm than one. It takes two to quarrel and fight; two to make a bargain. Thus, in the bad odour latterly attaching to Miss Emma Geach, the discerning neighbours had been speculating as to who her helpmate in ill-doing might be. Public curiosity was on the alert: and the untoward circumstance, that no one in particular could be pointed at, was mortifying. Harry Cole, the farrier and veterinary surgeon—a good-looking, fairly well-educated man, who had succeeded to his father's business—would be talked of one day; Sir Dene's groom, James, the next; a smuggling acquaintance of Black's who was often at the Trailing Indian, the third; and others; but when the utmost grounds of suspicion attaching to any one of these men came to be summed up, it was found to consist of one sole fact—that they might be seen on occasion

openly talking and laughing with Miss Emma. Not quite sufficient this to justify an accusation of arson, or what not. So that, in point of fact, the tantalised public considered themselves ill-used in the matter, and kept their eyes and curiosity in full play.

Seeing Tom Clanwaring perched on the table at the Trailing Indian, familiarly located there with Mr. and Mrs. Black and Miss Emma, would have been nothing: young Dene might have done as much himself, for he had just the same sociable sort of nature for sitting on tables or elsewhere as Tom; but taken in conjunction with the private meeting and whispering between Tom and Emma Geach on Christmas night, that both Dene and Otto had witnessed, it looked like something. The interview in the grove wore all the appearance of a secret one: and if young Dene joked a bit about the look of things, and Otto in his steady manner nodded assent, it was not to be wondered at. They had taken up the idea that Tom might have been the culprit in the matter. Not that he *was* so; they did not go so far as that; only that he might have been. Certain things were laughed and joked over more freely in those days than they are in these; were, in fact, regarded as venial errors. Dene talked and laughed about it indoors: and soon the only members of the household to whose ears the new suspicion had not penetrated, were Tom himself, Lady Lydia, and Sir Dene.

Strange to say, the only one to reprove was Jarvis. "Hold your foul tongues!" cried he, savagely. "Any way, it's no concern of yours." A reproof that only set Dene laughing more than before. And thus the week progressed, each day bringing more discomfort and drawing matters nearer to a crisis. On the Thursday, Dene the heir and his brother Charles took their departure for Scotland, to spend New-Year's Day with their mother.

Friday came in, bright with sunshine. The snow, threatening on the Monday, had passed off without falling, and the weather was really lovely. Somewhat frosty, but calm, fresh, and clear.

Talking together over the low gate of the narrow side avenue leading to Arde Hall, stood Tom Clanwaring and May. As



he was passing up from Hurst Leet, she happened to be there, in her scarlet-hooded cloak and white muff, the hood drawn round her bright face and bright brown curls. Fashions changed less capriciously then than they do now. Tom's mother had worn just the same sort of cloak ; but the cloaks had not gone quite out, even yet. There they stood : Tom oblivious of his business, May of the passing time.

"I'm so glad he is better," said May, alluding to Sir Dene—for Tom had been telling her that his grandfather was downstairs again. "Mr. Priar came in to tea last night, and was talking about him. He thinks he is changing very much."

"He has certainly changed the last few days, for he has been irritable with me for no reason—that is, when he notices me at all," replied Tom. "For the most part he turns away from me, and when I speak gives me short answers."

"Have you offended him?" asked May.

"I suppose so : but I cannot imagine how. Altogether I have not had a pleasant week of it, May. They are trying me tolerably hard just now."

May's sweet brown eyes softened in sympathy. "When people are ill, they feel cross without knowing why, Tom. I suppose Dene and Charley have left?"

"They started yesterday morning."

"I like Dene ; Charley too, for that matter. But I like Dene better than—yes, better than any one else at Beechhurst Dene," she added, casting a saucy glance at the handsome face bending towards her. "Dene is always—— Oh, look here !"

A commotion in the road caught her ear, and the silver of the Clanwaring livery caught her eye. The Beechhurst Dene cortége was approaching at a gallop. It was the custom then to pay morning calls in more state than royalty observes now. Two outriders rode first ; then came the carriage with its four horses, the postilions' jackets laced with silver matching the liveries of the outriders and the two footmen behind. Sir Dene did not drive four-in-hand ; but tempted by the fineness of the day, my Lady Lydia had come out visiting : her daughter, Mrs. Letsom, sat next her, Jarvis and Otto opposite.

"Tom, I believe they are coming to the Hall !" cried May, in a whisper.

Even so : and knowing the feeling in Lady Lydia's mind towards them, Tom and May might have preferred to pass out of sight, had there been means of doing so ; but the trees in winter were bare and open. As the carriage swept round, almost close to them, Tom lifted his hat to Lady Lydia and Mrs. Letsom. My lady answered the courtesy by a hard stare.

"What a pace they are going at !" exclaimed Tom. "Shall you have to go in, May?"

"I must. Of course, I must. Tom, he has been here every day this week," she cried in agitation, her bright eyes lifted for a moment, and then cast down again. "And mamma is beginning to like him very much !"

"Every day, has he," returned Tom, throwing back his velveteen coat, as if it were too hot for him.

"I would not come down to him one day : Susan was in quite a way about it. Papa and mamma were out, and so I could do as I liked. When does he join his regiment again?"

"I don't know, May. He will have to do it soon, I should imagine, or leave it altogether."

"I'm sure he has got up his strength quite enough now."

"Strength? Oh, it's not that, May. There's an attraction in the way. If he joined his regiment, he could not come down here at will."

May understood quite well that she was the attraction. Deep in thought now, she was looking away, seeing nothing.

"I do wish I had not any money of my own!" she whispered, really more to herself than to Tom. "It's that miserable legacy. Perhaps he wouldn't care for me without that. If my dear little sister had only lived, it would never have been mine."

"True," said Tom.

"Susan used to tell me when I was naughty that Master Tom—meaning you—would never care for me as he cared for that little sister," went on the young lady.

"Did she?" said Tom, a great merriment in his deep-set blue eyes. "I loved that child dearly, and remember it still. I must have been very old when she died, May : nearly four."

"I must go now, or they will be sending for me," cried Miss May, shrinking from the expression of the said eyes. "Good-bye. To-morrow's New-Year's Day, you know. Don't forget it."

"No danger," replied Tom. "Good-bye, May."

An ordinary hand-shake, and away went Tom, striding quickly to make up for lost time.

"New Year's Day," that May had reminded him of, implied a meeting. Just as it had grown into a custom for the Ardes to dine on Christmas-Day at Beechhurst Dene, so the Clanwarings invariably dined at the Hall on the first day of the new year. If no one else looked forward to the morrow's festive gathering, the two who had just parted did so. Parted reluctantly—for they would have liked to linger away the whole morning together.

Rather surprised was Tom, upon going up Dene Hollow, to see a few people congregated there. A cart had come to grief on nearly the old unlucky spot, but on this occasion it could not be charged to the "Shadow." The linch-pin had disappeared from one of the wheels: and the cart, which had contained grains was overturned. The sweet-smelling grains lay scattered on the highway; Hodge, Mr. Tillett's waggoner—for the cart was Mr. Tillett's—stood by with a rueful face.

The accident had occurred just as the Beechhurst Dene cortége was passing; it had startled the carriage horses, and sent them flying downwards at such a rate as to put the outriders to the gallop, and threaten another accident. Lady Lydia, ignoring chances, always went the way of Dene Hollow when she could do so: its level road and fair scenery were pleasant to her.

"Which accounts for the sharp pace they came round at," thought Tom, as he listened to this, and recalled the speed of the horses.

Leaving the cart and grains to their fate, he pursued his way, and turned into Harebell Farm. Not specially to relate the disaster, but because he had some business with Philip Tillett. The latter, however, was not at home, and Tom stayed a few minutes talking to Mary Barber.

For the capable earnest-minded woman—somewhat hard

and superstitious though she might be—had never quitted Harebell Farm. William Owen did not want her when he migrated to his new home: he meant to marry, and did marry shortly afterwards: and Mary Barber remained with Mr. Tillett and his motherless young daughter. She was called the housekeeper, but was treated as one of the family; having two maids under her, instead of one as in Mrs. Owen's time. When Tom went in she was seated in the parlour, hemming a white cravat.

"Bless my heart!" she exclaimed, staring at Tom through her tortoiseshell spectacles when he related the news. "The wheel off, and the pigs' food lying in the road!"

"Every grain of it," said Tom. "Cole's man had the wheel in hand, beginning to tinker it up."

"The wheel isn't much; the grains are the worst. And you are laughing over it, Mr. Tom!"

"Oh, they'll get the grains up again. You'd laugh yourself, if you had seen it, Mary. Hodge's face was a picture to look at."

"We've no luck with our pigs this year," she lamented. "I said so to the master the other day. That last lot of wash was put into a newly-painted barrel, through one of the men's carelessness, and almost poisoned the animals."

"Only not quite," put in Tom, always looking on the bright side of things.

"Well now, Mr. Tom—what caused the mishap to-day?"

"I have told you, Mary. The wheel came off the cart."

"'Twasn't that, sir."

"But it was that," returned Tom, looking at her.

"No, sir, it was not that," she repeated. "'Twas the Shadow."

"Nonsense!"

The retort nettled Mary Barber. The Shadow was there, and would always be there, she said solemnly: and she put it to him plainly whether horses were or were not in the habit of starting at that spot. Tom, half laughing, confessed that it was so, saying no more about the cart-wheel, and intending to drop the subject altogether. Not so Mary Barber. Laying the cravat and her spectacles on the table, she bent her head a little forward.

"What is it that frightens the animals, pray? Tell me that, if you can, Mr. Tom."

"I'm sure I don't know," said Tom, "unless it's the shadow of the branches, thrown on the road when the sun shines."

"It's not that, sir; you must know it's not. The Shadow's one of another sort. I give it a different name in my own mind."

"What name?"

"A curse."

"A curse!"

"A curse," Mr. Tom, she repeated, in her solemn tones. "What else is it, sir? Hasn't it been as a curse to a good many folk? Sir Dene could have thought it nothing less when he saw his beautiful grandchild lying dead before him."

Tom made no rejoinder now. His cousin Margaret's sad death had indeed brought grievous sorrow with it; to none worse than to him. To him, who had been the one to take Margaret up.

"We thought it was the ice that made the horses slip. There was ice on the road, you remember, Mary."

"It was not the ice," responded Mary Barber. "That was the excuse made, I know; but who believed it?"

Very few, Tom might have answered, had he chosen to do so. Mary Barber resumed.

"That time when my poor mother spoke to me of the Shadow—dying as she was, though I didn't see it—it sounded like so much gibberish in my ears. The next day, when she was gone, the words came back to me in a different way: for I've been a good deal with the dead and dying, Mr. Tom, and I know that what they speak just before the soul departs is sometimes like a prophecy. And as I stood at her grave in the churchyard whilst the parson was reading the burial service over her, and thought of what had sent her there before her time, it was borne in upon me like a revelation that mother's dying words were true—and a curse lying on the fine new road had killed her. It lies there to this day."

The less superstitious and more practical among the neighbours were apt to smile at this belief of Mary Barber's,

and call it a crotchet. Her master, a man of sound sense, told her to her face that she would go mad upon the foolish point some day, if she didn't take care. Perhaps Tom Clanwaring shared Mr. Tillett's scepticism, for he took up his hat to depart without comment of any sort.

"Tell the master I'll look in again to-morrow, Mary. If he consents to make the alteration, Sir Dene will meet him half-way in the cost. But we must have an answer. Good-day."

Meanwhile Lady Lydia paid her visits. Mrs. Arde's was the only one near home; the rest lay at a distance. While the afternoon was still bright, the outriders came cantering round the corner by Cole the farrier's and took the old hilly road that led to Beechhurst Dene, the nearest way from whence they were coming. The carriage followed close upon the outriders; and my lady, within it, felt tired to death. As it whirled round the corner—rather a sharp turn, that, by Cole's—two people stood talking outside the forge—having met accidentally a minute or two before. Tom Clanwaring was one; his occupation had taken him to some land lying out there: the other was Miss Emma Geach. A traveller, whose horse became suddenly disabled, had ridden in to the Trailing Indian, and the girl was despatched for Cole. Nothing loth, she; especially as she seized the opportunity to attire herself in her Sunday finery.

A gay gipsy hat upon her abundant hair, gleaming and glistening in the winter sunlight, and some blue ribbons flying, stood she. Otto Clanwaring looked from the carriage and made some remark to his brother in a low tone. Not so low, however, but that its sense struck on the ear of Lady Lydia.

"What?" she exclaimed. "What's that you say, Otto?"

He answered by a light word or two, as if the matter he spoke of were of no serious moment. Assuredly he did not do it ill-naturedly. "I don't affirm it, you know," he said: "but appearances certainly are against Tom."

They were, unfortunately. A dusky red light, telling of emotion, shone in my lady's dark face as she leaned out and looked back. Tom was striding onwards then, and Miss



Geach was exchanging compliments with Cole. The disclosure struck her quite as a revelation, for she had shared the curiosity of the public as to the doings of Miss Emma Geach. Otto would have dismissed the subject with a few careless words.

"What are your proofs, Otto?" she whispered, leaning forward.

"Proofs? Oh, I don't know about proof," was the answer, still carelessly indifferent. And then he just mentioned what he and young Dene had seen.

My lady was virtuously indignant—of course. To do her justice, she believed the story: and began talking of it in private with her eldest son when they reached home.

"Let it drop," said Jarvis, curtly.

"I'll let it drop when I have told Sir Dene," she retorted. "He can let it drop if he will."

"Confound it, madam! can't you hold your tongue!" savagely cried Jarvis.

"No, I can't, Jarvis. This is just what was wanted to get the fellow away."

"Eh?" returned Jarvis, a sudden gleam awakening in his sly dark eyes.

"Why, don't you see that it is? I knew he must be worthless, but the difficulty was to bring proofs to Sir Dene."

Jarvis drew a long breath, and began to discern a little light himself. Lady Lydia resumed.

"Putting all other considerations aside, Sir Dene could not allow him to remain here now. It seems quite Providential, Jarvis. I thought something or other would happen. It's what I've been waiting for."

Not until the following day, the first of the new year, did Lady Lydia find a convenient opportunity of speaking to Sir Dene. Their interview was a long one. What she said never was known, but we may be quite sure that she did not tell her tale by halves. Otto—to his own intense disgust—was called in to testify to it.

"I'll be shot if I'd have dropped a word had I thought she was going to make this row over it, and damage him with the old man!" mentally cried Otto, in wrath. But—always

speaking the truth if called upon to speak at all—he corroborated all, so far as he had cognizance of it. It appeared conclusive to Sir Dene: as might be seen by the look of utter sorrow on his pale face. In spite of all, he had loved Tom; had trusted him utterly; and this struck upon him as a cruel blow, rendering him harsh and unjust. What he ought to have done was to question Tom himself: and this he did not do. His outraged pride, worked upon also by Lady Lydia, forbade it.

How the day went on, even Lady Lydia hardly knew. Never had one of greater unpleasantness been spent at Beechhurst Dene. Tom came in during the afternoon: and Jarvis picked a quarrel with him. For once he succeeded in putting Tom into a passion—and there were rare moments, as previously stated, when Tom could be stirred to anger with the best of them. When he was in this white heat, Jarvis unwisely—or wisely as the reader may decide—ventured on a word of insult more stinging than usual. In his cool contemptuous manner, he threw in Tom's teeth a reproach of the accusation they were whispering against him. It was only a hint, a syllable; but it was quite sufficient. Tom lifted his hand and knocked the gallant officer down. Sir Dene witnessed it, for it occurred in his own parlour, which he was just entering. That brought on the climax. Smarting under one thing and another, Tom the poor scapegoat appeared in that moment to Sir Dene as a very offshoot of Satan; and he swore a round oath that he should be out of Beechhurst Dene before night. The Lady Lydia had received an opportune letter that very morning, urging Tom Clanwaring's immediate acceptance of the post offered him, or it must be given elsewhere.

Verily, as my lady had remarked, Providence seemed especially at work, ordering things in favour of the interests of herself and Captain Clanwaring!

## CHAPTER V.

## AN EVENTFUL EVENING.

It was New Year's evening. The reception rooms at Arde Hall were brilliantly lighted ; not with objectionable gas, but with wax candles, cool and pure. It was Mr. and Mrs. Arde's custom to give a dinner-party the first day of the new year to as many guests as their dining-room would conveniently hold : and that was four-and-twenty. Four-and-twenty had been invited for to-day ; but only two-and-twenty came : Sir Dene and his grandson Tom were absent from it.

Sir Dene sent an apology for himself : he had hoped to be well enough to come, but quite at the last moment found he was not so. For Tom little was said—he was altogether too insignificant to waste words on. Lady Lydia spoke a few vague syllables about going a journey ; and Captain Clanwaring, stroking his handsome moustache, made a supercilious remark in May's ear as he was taking her in to dinner, to the effect that Sir Dene found Tom could no longer be tolerated. That was all. Tom's absence caused neither regret nor comment ; nobody missed him or cared about it. Nobody, save one ; and she might not show that she did so. May heard Captain Clanwaring with a bright eye and smiling face, but her heart was sick with disappointment. For her, the sunshine of the evening had gone out : too keenly she felt it, as she sat through the long dinner.

The ladies rose to leave the room ; May went out last, following her mother. Captain Clanwaring whispered something as she passed—for it was he who bowed them out. May laughed in response : a sufficiently light laugh to listening ears. But her step grew slow and heavy as the door closed. They were all within the drawing-room before she was at the door.

“ Miss May ! ”

Turning at the whispered words, she saw Susan Cole, holding a twisted note in her hand.

“ Mr. Tom Clanwaring is outside, Miss May. There's

something wrong, I'm afraid. He asked me if I could manage to give you this without anybody seeing."

Opening the note, she stood under the hall-lamp whilst she read it. Susan, her mission executed, vanished.

"I am going away, May; probably for years, possibly for ever. Will you come out to me for one minute? I am at the avenue gate.—T. C."

Her brain whirled, her heart beat with its wild pain. Going away for ever! Showing herself for a minute or two in the drawing-room, May caught up a woollen shawl, and ran out at the hall-door. The avenue gate was only across the lawn. It was a starlight night, cold and frosty, but she did not at once distinguish Tom amidst the shrubs.

He was leaning against the gate, but stepped to meet her as she advanced. Involuntarily, in her deep agitation, she put out both her hands. He clasped and held them fondly to him, his agitation great as her own.

In moments of agony the mind is for the most part in a state of bewilderment. It was so with Mary Arde; it was so with him. Only a vague impression was retained by her afterwards, as to what was said at the interview. Perhaps the fault lay chiefly with Tom Clanwaring, for in his angry excitement he was less clear than he might have been. Those who had always been against him, trying to get him out of the Dene, had done their work at last, and ruined him with his grandfather, he explained. He was being sent away, Heaven knew where; certainly with little prospect of ever being allowed to return. He had to depart for Bristol at once by the night-mail, and wait in that city for orders on his way to Ireland.

She leaned against the gate for support: and would have pardoned him had he taken her to his arms and held her in their strong shelter. But Tom Clanwaring, honourable as ever, dared not do this. Many and many a time had the warm words of love rashly trembled on his lips, and he had turned them off with some light jest: if he had put a restraint on himself then, how doubly needful that he should do so now.

Even his own poor, uncertain position in Sir Dene's household was taken from him, and he was being sent adrift, to work for his living in the world. The inconsistency of attempting to think of Squire Arde's daughter was more palpably present to him that night than it had ever before been.

"I should have liked to wish Mr. and Mrs. Arde good-bye, May ; but I cannot meet the crowd they have here to-night. So the will must go for the deed."

"But what have you done?" she murmured. "*Why* are they sending you away?"

"I hardly know myself, May."

"Oh, but you must know," she said, thinking it an evasion to spare her pain. "What is it, Tom?"

"You will hear no end of charges against me, I doubt not," he said, and the vagueness of the reply did occur to her afterwards. "I don't know what they may say : and I don't think it is of much use asking you not to believe them. They call me the scapegrace, but I was always the scapegoat, you know, suffering for the sins of others, and shall be so to the end. May, I can no longer battle against the stream—and what end would it answer? It may be better that I should be away : but for leaving my dear old grandfather, I should say there could not be a question about it. Think of me as kindly as you can, May."

Her tears were falling. "Only tell me, Tom, that you have done nothing very wrong," she whispered, her mind in a state of vague fear : fear, she knew not of what : and perhaps his own want of clearness led to it. Mary Arde had never believed it possible that Sir Dene could turn against Tom to the point of discarding him without ample cause.

"If I have they have goaded me to it," was his answer, spoken in the moment's reckless hesitation, as he recalled his passion, and the flooring he had given the captain : for he attached no serious meaning to May's words, or suspected that she could really believe ill of him. "God bless and be with you always, May ! I cannot stay longer ; neither ought I to keep you out here. But I could not leave the place for good without seeing you."

"Why—why do you say it is *for good*?"

"Be very sure that they who have procured my banishment will take care I don't return, May. That's why."

"Are we to part—like this?" she wailed, her anguish rising almost beyond control.

"My darling, don't tempt me. Do you know what it is costing *me* to part like this?—to stand here and say quietly to you, *I am going?* Have you not known for some time past that if I had dared—— But, I must not say more: another moment and the temptation to speak will be greater than I can resist. You must understand well, May. Circumstances throw a barrier between us, and I may not presume ever to think of passing it. If there were only the least prospect of achieving any position in the world, I might whisper to you of hope, without forfeiting all honour; but there is none, and I do not."

She put out her trembling hands once more and lifted her eyes to his. To those wonderful blue ones in their deep caves, whose beauty even the night could not wholly conceal. The temptation was too great, and Tom Clanwaring bent his face to hers.

"Only a cousin's kiss, May," he murmured: "we used to call ourselves cousins when we were children, and surely none will grudge it us in parting. When I return—if I ever return—no doubt all danger will be over."

"Danger?" she breathed, questioningly.

"Danger that the scapegoat might forget himself and his honour by speaking of love. When you are the wife of a more lucky man than I, I may come back again, May. Never before, unless my grandfather recalls me."

"You give me up, then?" she exclaimed in her pain; the mortification that the renouncement undoubtedly brought to her.

"I do. I have no other resource. My parting blessing be upon you, May."

She drew her hands from his with a petulant gesture, and sped across the lawn, one bitter sob breaking from her lips; one more than bitter question from her heart—Did he care for her? When girls love as romantically as Mary Arde, they are apt to fancy that all else should give place to it. Tom Clan-



waring was Sir Dene's grandson—and Mary resentfully thought he might have been content to wait and see whether fortune would not smile on them before he renounced her. He knew *she* had money, so that they should not quite have starved! A few minutes alone in her chamber, effacing the traces of the tell-tale tears, and then she was in the drawing-room again, quite unnaturally gay, whirling through a mazy country dance with Captain Clanwaring.

There was one other person Tom Clanwaring would not omit to say farewell to before leaving the neighbourhood, and that was Mary Barber. In striding up to Harebell Farm, he met Cole the farrier at the turning of the lane. It will be remembered that this was the son of the man spoken of as Cole the farrier in the first part of this history. Young Cole and Tom had always been good friends.

"Good-night, Mr. Tom," said the man, as he was passing.

"Good-night, and good-bye," replied Tom. "I am going away, Cole."

Cole wheeled round on his heel. "Ay, sir, so I gathered at the Dene this evening. But not just yet, are you?"

"In an hour's time. James drives me into Worcester to catch the Bristol mail. Good luck to you, Cole!"

"Stop a moment, sir—I beg your pardon. The servants said something about a quarrel with Captain Clanwaring; is that the reason you've got to go?"

"I suppose so."

"Nothing has happened *since* that to banish you?"

"Nothing whatever. Fare you well, Cole. I've no time to lose."

As he went on up Harebell Lane, Cole stood and looked after him, as if in some hesitation. Finally, he continued his way towards his home.

Mary Barber was alone in the kitchen when Tom went in, her mind intent upon a curious incident that had occurred to her earlier in the evening, her hands busy with some cooking preparation for the morrow. To state that she was amazed by the news of Tom's banishment would be saying little. Ireland,

to the imagination of quiet country people, represented something like the opposite end of the world.

"It can't be!" she exclaimed, dropping the fork with which she was beating up eggs.

"This very night, Mary. This very minute, I may almost say, for in a few minutes I must be off."

Mary Barber stood quite still. Like Miss Arde, she thought he must have done something very terrible to turn his grandfather against him to this extent. Banished to Ireland! The very extremity of the measure brought revulsion to her mind.

"It won't be for long, Mr. Tom. Sir Dene would never keep you out there. 'Twould be like transportation."

"I have to go, Mary, whether the stay be long or short."

"What on earth will be done with the land? Who'll look to it?"

"I don't know," he replied. "They'll find some one, I suppose."

"Not they. You'll be sent for home again, Mr. Tom. And a nice kettle of fish I dare be bound you'll find things in! You away, and Sir Dene laid by—fine times for the men?"

Leaving her in this comforting belief, Tom crossed the lane and went in home. The time for his departure was at hand; James waited in the gig to drive him into Worcester, to catch the Bristol night mail, coming through the town on its way from Birmingham. He had been hoping to see his grandfather once more.

"It's of no good, Mr. Tom," said Gander, sorrowfully. "Sir Dene has give orders he was not to be disturbed any more to-night on any account whatever; and he locked his door when he went up to bed. Your portmanteau and other things are in the gig, sir."

"Then there's nothing more to keep me here. Turned out like a dog! Good-bye, Gander," he added, shaking the old retainer's hand heartily as he went out to the gig. "I'll drive, James."

The groom handed him the reins and took the vacant seat, and Gander watched the gig until the night hid it from view.

There came into the man's remembrance the turning out of Geoffry Clanwaring in the days gone by ; and a prevision lay upon Gander that Tom, unlike his father, would never return to be forgiven.

The departure of Tom Clanwaring took the neighbourhood by surprise, more especially so because the precise cause of banishment could not be ascertained. Sir Dene had issued a sharp order to Lady Lydia and her family that nothing should be mentioned abroad—meaning in regard to graceless Miss Emma Geach. For once Lady Lydia was glad to obey him ; her object was gained ; Tom was gone, and she could well concede the rest. Jarvis was silent from policy, Otto from vexation, and Dene and Charles Clanwaring were away. So that scandal was buried ; never, Sir Dene hoped, to be unearthed again. But there was another sin, or rather a frightful suspicion of it, brought against Tom, on which it might be well, for the family honour, to be silent also.

By the time service was over on the following day, Sunday, the second of January, the fact that Tom Clanwaring had been sent from Beechhurst Dene in disgrace was pretty generally known. Servants will talk ; and the news had spread. Lady Lydia and her children also talked, for that matter, telling the fact that he was gone. Certain hints and innuendoes were dropped by them—not by Otto—imparting a notion that Tom must have been guilty of conduct too bad to be spoken of, and which for the sake of the name he bore had to be hushed up. How near they were to the truth—or, rather, to what was supposed to be the truth at the Dene—few guessed.

But, of all, none felt more surprise than Squire Arde. In his secret heart he not only liked Tom Clanwaring but thought extremely well of him, and he could not imagine Tom guilty of any really bad conduct. In candour it must be added that the Squire had not the remotest suspicion of any attachment existing between Tom and his daughter, and in his pride would have deemed it utterly impossible. May had not spoken of Tom's visit of the previous night.

Leaving his wife and daughter at their own home after service, the Squire went on with Lady Lydia to Beechhurst

Dene. Sir Dene, only just up, and looking very ill, opened his heart to his friend of many years, who stood, as may be said, in the light of uncle to Tom the scapegoat. And, in point of fact, the relationship, if it may be called so, had always stood rather in the way of my lady's plans against Tom. During the walk home she had talked in the most motherly way of Tom, lamenting his deplorable sins after the manner of a pitying saint. Not even out of her did Mr. Arde get at the nature of the sins; but she did drop a hint that he had shamefully wronged his grandfather in some money transaction in the hour of his departure. Mr. Arde asked Sir Dene point-blank what this wrong was.

"Why did Lydia allude to it?" rejoined Sir Dene, a shade of bitter mortification rising to his pale, sad face. "Ungrateful as he has proved himself, unworthy the name of Clanwaring, I wouldn't have it known abroad for the world. All this past night, in spite of his conduct in the other affair, I have said to myself that it surely cannot have been he. To steal money is not the work of a Clanwaring."

"What other affair?" questioned Mr. Arde, noting the words.

"Never mind," returned Sir Dene, sharply. "That at least may be buried in oblivion from henceforth. He has got his dismissal for it, so let it pass."

And on this point Mr. Arde found that further questioning was useless; so that he was no wiser than before as to the true cause of Tom's disgrace. They told him of the other; as Lady Lydia had hinted at it, Sir Dene thought it might be as well to disclose the whole. Sir Dene just mentioned the heads, hating every word that fell from his lips, and my lady supplied the details.

The facts were these. After the explosion had taken place the previous afternoon, and Tom had been made to understand he must quit the place that night, Sir Dene, terribly upset by the disturbance, shut himself into the bay-parlour. The agitation had made him too ill to think of keeping his dinner engagement at the Hall, and he charged those who were going there to say so. My lady and Mrs. Letsom went up to attire themselves for the occasion; Captain Clanwaring, reviving

from the effects of his overthrow and Tom's blow, was engaged with a visitor. One of the two gentlemen who had dined there on Christmas Day—Major Fife—had again driven over from Worcester. He declined to come in, saying he had no time, but asked the captain to walk about with him out of doors. So they made their way round to that side of the house where the trees and shrubs gave most seclusion.

While Sir Dene was thus sitting alone in the dusk of the evening, Gander presented himself, saying that Mr. Parker had called to pay his rent. Rather glad to receive it—for the half-year's rent had been due since Michaelmas—Sir Dene bade Gander show him in. Mr. Parker entered, making many apologies for not having been able to bring the money before. Sir Dene, always considerate to his tenants, especially the smaller ones, heard him with good-nature, and filled in a receipt—some of which he kept ready written in that upright piece of furniture, the *secrétaire*—by firelight. The money, forty-five pounds, was handed to Sir Dene in a canvas bag generally used for samples of barley, the farmer observing that twenty pounds of it was in gold, and the rest in notes on the Worcester Old Bank, and that Sir Dene would find the amount correct. Sir Dene nodded; he had no doubt of that; and put the bag on the table unopened. Mr. Parker, declining refreshment, left, being in a hurry, saying he would call for his bag in a day or two and drink a glass of ale then. After his departure, Sir Dene sat a few minutes in thought; and then with a deep sigh, stood up, undid the bag, and counted the money. He was putting it back in the bag and tying the tape when Tom Clanwaring came in. The sight of him disturbed Sir Dene afresh. Hastily thrusting the bag into the *secrétaire*, the lid of which had stood open, he was about to lock it, when, either from agitation or accident, he dropped the key. Tom stepped forward and picked it up, to save his grandfather from stooping. Sir Dene locked the *secrétaire*, but did not remove the key, for Tom had begun to speak, and he turned quickly to confront him in his anger, pointing imperiously to the door.

“Quit my presence, sir. I will hear nothing from you.”

Not on the instant did Tom obey. He had come in to

confess contrition for the heat he had displayed an hour before, the anger betrayed in the presence of his grandfather. Not a syllable would Sir Dene hear: and by way of summarily cutting short the discussion, he quitted the room, leaving Tom in it. Gander, at his pantry door, accosted his master as he was passing on to the dining-room, to say that Cole the farrier craved a minute's speech of Sir Dene.

"I can't see him; I can't attend to anything just now," interrupted Sir Dene. "Let him come later."

Gander had no need to repeat this, for Cole was standing behind him and heard it. Cole had been regaled in the servants' hall with the account of the explosion, and the news that Mr. Tom was turned out of the Dene. Saying he would call again towards night, he took his departure.

After pacing the dining-room for three or four minutes in much perturbation, Sir Dene returned to the bay-parlour. It was now empty—as he expected—the door was shut and all things were apparently undisturbed. Remembering that he had left the key in the lock of the secrétaire, Sir Dene took it out before he sat down.

It was rather a remarkable circumstance, taken in conjunction with another remarkable circumstance to be related immediately, that Sir Dene did not again quit the bay-parlour, but remained in it for the rest of the evening. He took nothing but a basin of soup for dinner; and that Gander brought to him; the family, you remember, were dining at the Hall. Between seven and eight o'clock he sent Gander to summon Tom Clanwaring to his presence, who was then upstairs packing his things. This was to be the last interview. Very coldly and distantly did Sir Dene speak to Tom, gave him a few concise instructions as to how he was to proceed to take the mail that night as it passed through Worcester on its way to Bristol; and thence travel to the latter place, where he would wait at a certain inn for instructions from Ireland. Taking out his pocket-book, he handed him a sum of money in notes for his journey, and something over, shook hands with him by way of farewell, and dismissed him, wishing him, as a parting injunction, better conduct in another place than he had latterly displayed at Beechhurst Dene. Tom would have lingered.



He earnestly desired to say a word in his own defence—though, be it always understood, he was absolutely ignorant that any particularly grave offence was attributed to him—to plead his cause and ask *why* his grandfather was taking this extreme measure of discarding him. But Sir Dene stopped him at once, refused to hear a word, and told him that he would not do so. And this was their final leave-taking. Tom completed his packing, and then went off to his interview with May Arde. Sir Dene sat on, alone.

Between eight and nine, Cole came again, and was admitted. His business was to get the prescription for some famous new horse-medicine of which Sir Dene had spoken to him a week before, and promised to give him. Sir Dene went at once to the secrétaire for the prescription, telling Cole to hold the light. The first thing that struck Sir Dene on opening the lid, was that the bag of money was gone. In his astonishment he spoke words which disclosed to Cole the circumstance of the loss and the amount in the bag. Even as Sir Dene spoke, the thought flashed over him that it could only have been taken by Tom: no one else had had access to the room: and in his horror and fear lest such a disgrace on the name of Clanwaring should be published, he first of all enjoined the man to silence, and then strove to smooth over the matter by saying it was possible the bag was not lost, but had been removed to the safer quarters of his own chamber upstairs. Cole took his cue, and affected to believe that his honour would there find it. The horse-doctor was a keen man; and some muttered words of Sir Dene's, "What! has he done this in addition to the rest!" almost made him doubt whether suspicion might not be turning on Tom. However, it was not a business he could presume to intermeddle with: and thanking Sir Dene for the prescription, Cole said good-night with the most unconscious air in the world.

Then Sir Dene summoned Gander and bade him shut the door. "When I went out of this parlour to the dining-room earlier in the evening—do you remember it, Gander?" began he. "It was when you told me Cole had come up, and I said I could not see him. Do you remember it, I ask?"

"Yes, Sir Dene."

"I left Mr. Tom in this parlour. How long did he remain in it? Did you notice him when he came out?"

"He didn't come out this way at all, Sir Dene. He must have left it by the window here."

"How do you know?"

"Well, sir, he was not in here when you came back again—I followed you in directly, if you remember, with the candles. And I'm sure he had not come out by the door while you were away, Sir Dene. If he had I must have seen him. Mr. Tom oftener leaves by this glass door than any other way, when going straight out of doors."

Sir Dene paused. "Who came into the room besides, while I was away from it?"

"Not a soul," replied Gander.

And that exactly accorded with Sir Dene's own impression. As he had not shut the door of the dining-room, he thought he must have seen them if they did. Nevertheless, he *hoped* the contrary, and spoke accordingly in his exasperation.

"Some one did, I know."

"No one did, Sir Dene," promptly returned Gander, with the familiarity of an old servant. "They couldn't. I never lost sight of the door."

This was true. Gander's pantry and Sir Dene's door were within view of each other at opposite sides of the passage. It was simply impossible that any one could have entered the bay-parlour during the short interval in question unseen by Gander.

"Did you see Mr. Tom when he came into it?" resumed Sir Dene—as though willing to put Gander's tale to the test.

"I watched him in, sir. 'Twas just after Farmer Parker had left. As Mr. Tom came down the passage, he asked me whether Sir Dene was in the bay-parlour; I said 'Yes,' and he went in. I could hear you talking together for half-a-minute, Sir Dene, and then you came out. Mr. Tom didn't come out at all, and must have gone through the glass doors."

And with this conclusive evidence, what was Sir Dene Clanwaring to think but that Tom was the culprit? It was as clear as though they had caught him in the act, reiterated the Lady Lydia.

Such was the story told to Mr. Arde. In the impulse of the moment he accepted the belief as warmly as they did, assuming Tom could not be innocent, except by a miracle; and had been driven into crime at last. And though he regarded it with almost as much horror as Sir Dene—for was not Tom connected with him?—he yet felt a large amount of pity. “Turned out almost penniless, I suppose; and so the temptation was too great,” thought the Squire, as he went out of the presence of Sir Dene. But this feeling of pity Lady Lydia unconsciously crushed.

“And yet, I can hardly think he’d do it!” broke forth Mr. Arde, a revulsion setting in as he stood outside the front-door, talking with her.

My lady glanced round, making sure they were quite alone, and her voice sank to a whisper.

“You wouldn’t say so, if you knew all. The other thing he has been guilty of is worse than that.”

“*Worse* than that!”

“At least—if not worse, it’s something very bad indeed of another nature. People estimate offences with different eyes, you know, Mr. Arde. I think theft might only have been expected from a man given to such low tastes and associates as Tom Clanwaring.”

“But what is the other thing he has done?” resumed the Squire. “Can’t you tell me?”

“I cannot tell you. The probability is that you will hear of it before long—for I should think the neighbourhood is sure to get hold of it; but Sir Dene has forbidden it to be mentioned by any of us. My son Jarvis, too, has begged me to be silent for the young man’s sake. Ill as Tom Clanwaring has behaved, Jarvis yet treats him with consideration.”

Away went the Squire, the words rousing his curiosity and puzzling him mightily. For he was no wiser than ever as to what had driven Tom from Beechhurst Dene. “He must have turned out an awful scamp of some sort,” was his mental summing up.

“Well, what have you learnt? what has led to his abrupt dismissal?” eagerly questioned Mrs. Arde, as her husband entered. Excessively curious on her own score, she had been

waiting impatiently the result of his visit to the Dene. Mary, standing by, held her breath as she listened for the answer.

"I can't come to the bottom of it," said Mr. Arde; "neither Sir Dene nor my lady seems inclined to speak out. There has been a series of general misconducts, I fancy; petty ill-doings one after another; Lady Lydia says no one can imagine what they have had to put up with from him, and how forbearing they have been. But"—and Mr. Arde's tones fell to something like consternation—"whatever his petty offences might have been, he need not have capped them with a crime."

May's trembling lips parted. "A crime!" echoed Mrs. Arde.

"He went off with a bag of money belonging to Sir Dene. Stole it from the secretary."

"No!" passionately cried May. "That he never did!"

Mr. Arde turned upon her in surprise.

"Why are you agitated, child? It does not affect you. I called out 'No,' just as you have done, until I heard the facts of the case."

"And was this what he was dismissed for?" inquired Mrs. Arde.

"No, no; did you not understand me? This occurred after his dismissal—as he was going away. I tell you I can't get at the truth of what he was sent away for," continued Mr. Arde: "Lady Lydia says it is too bad to be mentioned. I don't think they'd have told me about the money either, but for a hint from my lady; and so I asked Sir Dene point-blank about it. But, mark you; though it has been disclosed to me, this theft—I am connected with the fellow, unfortunately, and that makes a difference—not a syllable of it must be breathed abroad. Lady Lydia, incensed though she has reason to be against Tom, begged me to bury it in silence, for his own sake. As if I should proclaim it! The disgrace would reflect itself on me almost as much as on the Clanwarings."

Miss May metaphorically tossed her head, incipiently rebellious. "It's nothing but a plot from beginning to end," ran her thoughts. "A 'long series of petty ill-doings,' finishing off with something too bad to be spoken about, and stealing

a bag of money ! Oh, the wicked slanderers ! They may just as well say that I have done it."

But that was destined to be an eventful night in more ways than one, and there is something else to be related concerning it. Somewhere about the hour that the money must have disappeared—that is, during the short interval Sir Dene was absent from the bay-parlour—a little earlier or a little later as might have been, Mary Barber went over on an errand to Beechhurst Dene. Neighbours in rural districts borrow household trifles indiscriminately one of another : when there are no shops within easy reach, this is almost a matter of necessity. Harebell Farm happened to be out of lemons. Mr. Tillett, coming home in the course of the afternoon from attending the corn-market at Worcester, the first market of the new year, told Mary Barber that he had invited some friends to spend the following day at the farm, and particularly desired a lemon pudding to be served. Vexed at her own forgetfulness, she made no demur, thinking she could borrow the lemons from the Dene. Sometimes the Dene borrowed things from her. So at the twilight hour, Mary Barber, putting on a shawl and bonnet, went across the lane on her errand. She had just entered the gate when a man came dashing down the path, and grasped her, as if for protection from some pursuing evil. Considerably astonished was Mary Barber : and not the less so when she recognized the intruder as Randy Black. The man was completely unhinged ; his face white, hands trembling, and breath laboured. In the moment's abandonment he confessed the cause of this—which he most assuredly would not have done in a calmer moment. He had just seen Robert Owen.

The assertion startled Mary Barber herself to terror. It was so long since anything of the kind had arisen. Black, it appeared—at least this was his own account—was going to the Dene to try to see Captain Clanwaring. He was about half-way down the path leading to the house when some man, as he at first thought, glided out from between the trees and stood facing him. The next moment, Black saw that it was Robert Owen. Black turned tail and took flight in terror ; and so met Mary Barber. Mary Barber, listening to this,

looking at the gloomy path before her, the dark wintry trees, decided to let the lemons rest just then, and send some one for them by-and-by.

They passed out together, Black keeping very close to her.

She went back to her own gate; he went also: and it seemed as if the man dared not just then be without companionship. Though getting better from his illness, he was ailing still, and Mr. Priar had ordered him not to go out: an order Black paid no manner of attention to. The carter's boy at Harebell Farm, leaving work for the night, came through the farm gate in his smock-frock, whistling.

"If you'll go up along o' me to the inn, and bring down a physic-bottle I want taken to Dr. Priar's, I'll give you a sixpence, Ned Pound," said Black. And Mary Barber could not help noticing how the man's voice still trembled.

"I'll go, and thank ye," replied Ned Pound, after a pause of doubt as to whether so munificent an offer could be genuine—for the boy had never possessed a sixpence of his own in his whole life. "I say, what makes your teeth chatter so?"

"This confounded cold night," replied Black: "it's enough to freeze one's bones. Come along."

Mary Barber looked after them as they went up the lane, Black's hand on the lad's shoulder. The extreme terror displayed by so hardened a man, struck her, and always had struck her as being marvellously strange.

"He didn't care to go on alone," thought she; "that physic-bottle's only a lame excuse. And now—what should have brought the poor master back again? I thought he was at rest for good."

What indeed! But, in this one instance, Black's fears had misled him. The figure he had taken for an apparition was no other than one of flesh and blood—Major Fife's. It will be remembered that Sir Dene and Gander both noticed the striking resemblance Major Fife bore to the late Robert Owen.

It happened that Major Fife had come over from Worcester that afternoon to press his claims again on Jarvis Clanwaring. Totally declining to be put off any longer with vague promises, which Jarvis could alone give, the major, not caring in his own



interests to proceed to extremities, discussed the aspect of things as they walked about amidst the winter trees, both smoking. To appeal to Sir Dene—as Major Fife half threatened to do, there and then—would not serve his cause, Jarvis assured him, but the contrary; most probably destroy all hope from that quarter for the future. Jarvis offered to give him a legal undertaking to repay a portion of the money, if not all, by that day fortnight, the fifteenth of January. It was the best he could do. Captain Clanwaring was tolerably candid about the state of his affairs; and the major, clearly seeing that there was no chance of making better terms, was fain to accept these. Whilst Jarvis went in to write the document, the major, preferring still to remain where he was and finish his tobacco, strolled in and out amongst the trees and down the path; and thus ensued the encounter with Black. The man's extraordinary conduct, evidently the result of terror, astonished Major Fife not a little. He mentioned it to Captain Clanwaring on his return. The captain fancied, by the description given, that the intruder must have been Randy Black, but could not account for his behaviour. Neither then nor later did it come to Jarvis Clanwaring's knowledge that Major Fife bore any resemblance to the late Robert Owen, of Harebell Farm. Major Fife at once departed in the gig; which James the groom had been taking charge of at the front-entrance.

And as Ned Pound was coming down Harebell Lane with the physic-bottle and the promised sixpence, he met Captain Clanwaring striding up to the Trailing Indian.

## CHAPTER VI

### AT SIR DENE'S SECRÉTAIRE.

IN a day or two there arrived two letters from Tom Clanwaring, dated Bristol. The one, written to Mr. Arde, expressed his regret that he had been obliged to leave without saying farewell to himself and Mrs. Arde, but that he had not liked to intrude

upon them when they were occupied with their guests. It alluded to his abrupt dismissal, stated that he knew not the cause of it and was unconscious of any offence that could have led to it, unless it was the quarrel with Captain Clanwaring in the afternoon, when he confessed that he had allowed himself to fall unduly into anger. Not a word did it breathe of any sense of injustice, or cast the slightest reflection upon man, woman, or child ; the sweetness of Tom Clanwaring's nature was never more unconsciously displayed than in that farewell letter. Squire Arde read it over once, and then began it again.

The other letter was to Sir Dene. Tom earnestly begged his grandfather to believe that he had not consciously been guilty of any offence towards him, or been willingly ungrateful. Nothing, he said, could be further from his thoughts. His most earnest prayer and hope now was that Sir Dene should sometime be convinced of this ; would see how much he had always cared for him, done his best to serve him, and how bitterly he was feeling the separation. Tom added some directions in the last page as to certain matters connected with the estate, so that trouble might be saved to those who should succeed him in its management. It was a long letter, every word breathing the sentiments of a kindly and honest gentleman, and of the affection he felt for his home and grandfather.

Too kindly, too honest to be allowed to fall under the eye of Sir Dene. Lady Lydia who had taken the precaution to break the seal and skim the contents—might put no belief in the good faith of the letter : but she was by no means sure it might not act so far on the old man's tender feelings as to induce him to recall Tom. So she dropped it into the fire and held her tongue about its arrival. The opening of other people's letters was a grave offence in those days, not only against the code of honour : but who observed any sort of code to the humble dependant Tom Clanwaring ?

And Sir Dene never knew he had written to him.

Now Squire Arde possessed a conscience. Before the letter arrived, he had begun to veer round again to Tom and doubt whether he had really been guilty of any grave offence ; that letter only served to increase the feeling and the doubt. He could not always forget that poor Tom, so hardly used amongst

them, was the nephew of his dead wife ; and he suddenly determined to go to Bristol and see him. It was understood that Tom was waiting at Bristol, according to instructions received from Ireland, until some agricultural implements should be ready that he was to take over with him. Saying nothing to any one except his wife—and to her only that business called him away for a day or two—Squire Arde sent his servant to Worcester to engage a place in the Bristol mail, and departed himself the same night for the latter city, as Tom had previously done.

He saw Tom ; and listened to his version of matters (given in answer to direct questioning), of what his treatment had been at Beechhurst Dene, especially in the past week ; and Mr. Arde came to the conclusion that Tom had been more sinned against than sinning. But when he came to speak of some grave offence or crime, such as Lady Lydia had hinted at, but would not explain, Tom declared she must have been mistaken, for he had committed none. Mr. Arde, thinking it impossible she could have been so far mistaken, pressed the point ; but Tom adhered to what he said.

“ It does not matter,” he lightly observed in his good-natured way. “ I don’t claim to be better than other people, sir.” He had never called Mr. Arde “uncle ;” had not been taught to do so. It might have been different had Mr. Arde’s first wife lived. The last thing Mr. Arde spoke of was the money.

“ By the way,” began he in a careless tone, “ there has been a loss at the Dene since you left : or, rather, the evening you were leaving. A bag of money—I am told it contained forty-five pounds—that Sir Dene put into his secretary, disappeared in a mysterious manner.”

“ That must be the bag I saw him put in !” cried Tom, raising his honest eyes fearlessly to the Squire’s face. “ How very strange ! But it can’t be lost.”

“ Yes, I believe it was that same bag. Sir Dene said something about your having been present when he locked it up. It seems he left the key in the lock, and was absent from the room three or four minutes ; not more. During that time the bag disappeared.”

“ Who went into the room ?”

"There it is. No one went in, except Sir Dene and Gander. They did not see you come out, either."

"I? Oh, I went out by the glass doors. The truth is, I was so grieved at Sir Dene's refusing to hear a word of what I wanted to say, that as he went out one way, I turned out the other to walk off my vexation."

"Well, they both declare that no one went into the room. Sir Dene—— What now?"

A sudden light, as of awakened remembrance, shone in Tom Clanwaring's eyes. "Halloa!" he exclaimed, "I saw ——" And there he stopped short.

"Saw what?" asked Mr. Arde.

"No," said Tom, "I'll say no more. The fact is, I thought I remembered to have seen some one go into the room: but perhaps I was mistaken. I dare say I was mistaken."

"Go in by which door?"

"No, sir; I'll say no more."

"You ought to say. The money was stolen."

"I never will, sir. I wouldn't say it if I were certain. No, not though I had seen it taken: which I certainly did not. Let people fight their own battles."

"And suppose they were to suspect *you* of taking it?"

Tom burst into a laugh. "Suspect me of taking money! Not they. They know me better than that, all of them."

"Suppose they were to *accuse* you of it?"

"Accuse me to whom, sir? Not to Sir Dene: it would be waste of trouble. He knows that his money would be as safe with me as it is with him. I am his grandson, Mr. Arde."

Mr. Arde looked at the open countenance, the blue eyes, so full of earnest truth, and mentally saw that whoever else had stolen the money, Tom had not.

"Were it told you that you had been accused of this thing, you would surely speak, Tom!"

"I don't think I should," was Tom's answer. "I would rather do a man a good turn than a bad one, be he friend or foe. That is the only safe way to get on pleasantly in this life. It all comes home to us, sir. I don't believe a man ever did the smallest kindness, but it was in some way returned to him; I feel sure that for every injury a man or woman designedly

inflicts on others a worse evil is returned to them. Mrs. Owen taught me these truths when I was a child, and I have seen them exemplified scores of times since then."

But, though Mr. Arde felt at rest on the score of Tom's misconduct, he could not effect his return to the Dene. The edict of banishment had gone forth, and might not be revoked. Neither did Mr. Arde see any urgent reason for the revocation. He considered that some experience of the world might benefit Tom rather than the contrary : and instead of telling Tom he would help him to return, he urged him not to "kick" against the new post in Ireland, but to do his best and make himself useful in it. Things might brighten, he observed ; they generally did by dint of a little patience and perseverance. Tom replied that he had no intention of kicking against it : he was turned adrift and it appeared Hobson's choice—to go there, or starve.

"No need to starve," retorted the Squire : "you've health and strength, and a good share of brains. Not a man in England, or Ireland either, knows land better than you do, Tom. And look here : I've brought you a bit of money."

He took a hundred pounds from his pocket—to Tom's intense astonishment. The Squire explained. He had been putting it by for him bit by bit ever since Tom was a child. Foreseeing perhaps that Beechhurst Dene might not always be a home for him, and the time might come when he would be thrown upon his own resources, Mr. Arde, recognizing that Tom had some kind of claim upon him, put by this money by degrees for a rainy day. Had he found Tom to be erring and worthless he would have kept it in his pocket : hence his journey to Bristol.

"Put it up safely, Tom, and take care of it. Don't spend it unless you really require it. Should you never be recalled to the Dene, it may be useful to you."

Tom thanked him with all his heart ; his earnest eyes, his expressive face, betraying his gratitude better than words could do it. Throughout his life he had been singularly responsive to kindness : probably from the little he had ever received.

On the morning following this, after Mr. Arde had quitted Bristol, Tom received a letter from Cole the farrier, saying that he had not been able to get his address before, and now

only surreptitiously through Gander's good-nature, he wrote to tell Tom that he had seen some one—whom he mentioned—standing at the open secrétaire that evening, just at the time the money must have been taken: and that person was no doubt the thief. The reason for Cole's writing this was that a hint had reached him, throwing some suspicion on Tom Clanwaring—though, in his delicacy, he did not expressly say so. Tom immediately returned the following letter to Cole:

“Thank you for writing to me, my good fellow: your motive was a right one, and I think I discern the cause prompting you to do so. But say no more to any one. Keep silence. Even if you had *proof* as to who took the money—which you have not—there may be private reasons why it should not be mentioned abroad. As to me—for what I conclude is, that you have heard my name brought in—my back is broad enough to bear anything put upon it by idle report: and you must know, and I know, that no one whom I care for or who cares for me, would suspect me of such a thing. Sir Dene knows me better, and so do others. I rely upon you to be silent. Let people fight out their own battles: it is no affair of yours; I do not intend to make it mine. Good luck to you, Cole, in all ways.

“Sincerely yours, T. C.”

Tom Clanwaring was right. Not long did any one who knew him keep up the suspicion as to the money. A complete revulsion of feeling set in with Sir Dene: and he called himself names for having allowed his mind to entertain such a suspicion for a moment. Even Lady Lydia, upon sober reflection, grew to think that it could not have been Tom—for nothing in his past life had led her to suppose he would descend to thieving. Make the worst of him, and of the sins she had been fond of attributing to him, he would scarcely fall so low as that. No. Had there been nothing else against Tom, he might have been recalled at once. But there was. Not to speak of trifling faults, there was that other grave charge, not easily refuted. It was *that* that troubled Sir Dene: he had always believed Tom as morally good a man as his father



Geoffry had been : and the discovery to Sir Dene was a bitter one. No chance of that being refuted at present : if it ever was, or could be.

It must be remarked that Lady Lydia did at first believe Tom had taken the money. In the teeth of the one assumed fact—that only he had been in the room—she could not well think otherwise. The possibility that any one else had stolen in through the glass doors, did not then occur to her or to Sir Dene. But it was the theory taken up now : though whether she would have arrived at it of her own accord is uncertain.

On the Tuesday, the day following Mr. Arde's departure for Bristol, Mrs. Arde and Mary Barber met accidentally in Dene Hollow, the latter with a large market-basket in her hand. The two invariably had a gossip together when they met : and on this occasion Mrs. Arde (who considered Tom Clanwaring belonged to Mary Barber at least as much as to any one else) chose to ignore her husband's injunction to secrecy, and whispered in confidence the story of Tom's misdoings ; that is, of their own crowning act. Mary Barber's hard face took a harder hue in her astonishment ; her grey eyes fixed themselves on Mrs. Arde's.

"Steal money ! *You* don't believe it of him !" she said fiercely.

"But I can't help believing it, impossible though it seems that he could do such a thing," returned Mrs. Arde. "There was no one else near the room, you see."

"He went out by the glass doors ?" quietly observed Mary Barber.

"They say so."

"Which proved that they were open, reasoned Mary Barber. "What was to prevent someone else from going in and helping themselves to the money ?"

Mrs. Arde paused : the idea had not occurred to her. They were not altogether conjurors in those parts ; besides, the accusation against Tom, assumed to be a certainty, had kept suspicion from other quarters.

"I fancy there could not have been time for any one else to enter" said Mrs. Arde, revolving matters in her mind.

"A thing like that's soon done—you must know it is, ma'am. Thieves are deft of fingers."

"Of course it might be so," spoke the lady, slowly. "But—was any bad character likely to be near the house at that hour?"

"Tramps and other ill-folk are always about at dusk, watching their opportunity," said Mary Barber. "A couple of gipsies, big strong men, too, were at our house on Saturday, wanting to sell iron skewers. One of 'em might get up to the Dene from Harebell Lane quite easily. And if none of the servants were on the look-out, why——"

The woman suddenly ceased speaking. There had flashed into her memory one whom she saw flying in terror from the house at dusk on Saturday. Not a tramp; but a man who would put his hand to worse deeds, if report might be trusted, than any tramp in the three kingdoms.

"What was the exact time this theft happened? Do you know, ma'am?" she presently resumed.

"I don't quite know. Some time between four and five. Nearer five, I should think, for it was almost dark. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I—I was wondering," returned Mary Barber, evasively, saying no more in her caution. She wanted time for reflection. "Any way, Mrs. Arde, don't go on suspecting Mr. Tom Clanwaring," were her parting words, emphatically spoken. "He'd no more touch what's not his own than you or I would. He's a gentleman to his finger ends; ay, and a right noble one into the bargain. Wasn't sending him off to that Irish Botany Bay enough for 'em, but they must bring up this?"

Mrs. Arde continued her way. Mary Barber stood up against the railings lost in thought. It happened to be in that part of the Hollow where her poor mother's cottage had stood: her feet were pressing what might once have been the kitchen floor, on which she had played in infancy. The cottage was gone, and her mother was gone, so long ago now that its very remembrance was growing dim: and she and Sir Dene Clanwaring were drawing nearer and nearer to that other world, to which so many connected with this history, and younger than they, had passed on before them.

Not that any of these thoughts were in Mary Barber's mind then; it was otherwise occupied. What she wanted to recall was the precise time at which she had gone over to the Dene on Saturday night. And, try as she would, she could not do so. All she was sure of was that it was dusk; not dark: but she had not taken note of the time. The cuckoo-clock (that had passed with the other things into Mr. Tillett's possession from William Owen) was getting old like herself, and was often out of order. On Saturday it had stood still all day.

The more she reflected, the stronger grew her conviction that the criminal was Black. Black, and no one else. One thought led to another. She began to doubt whether Black's state of terror had not arisen from a fear that he was being pursued; that his assertion of having seen the apparition of Robert Owen was an invention to account for the fear. And this was the more likely from the fact that some years had elapsed since any report of the ghost had been raised: Mary Barber had been living in the agreeable assurance that time had "laid" it. Turning back, for she had been on her way to Hurst Leet, she went straight in at the front-gates of Beechhurst Dene.

"It's right they should know I saw Black where I did," ran her thoughts, "and especially if any of 'em are really accusing Mr. Tom. Not that I believe *that*. Black's a nasty one to make an enemy of: so I'll just say that I saw him, and no more. Let Sir Dene do what he likes in it."

Considerably astonished was Jones the footman, when he threw open the door of the front entrance, to find no one there but Mary Barber. The woman knew good manners as well as Jones did, perhaps better, and apologised for not going round to the side entrance, on the score of her time being "precious" that morning. But she did not see Sir Dene: he was very poorly, Jones said, and not up yet: would her ladyship do? Mary Barber considered, and then saying that my lady would do, put her basket down. But she would rather have seen Sir Dene. So she was shown into the library to my lady's presence, and to that of her two sons, who happened to be with her. My lady's curiosity was a little raised as to what the woman could want—she had heard her come to the front

entrance. She sat near the window, working at some silk patchwork for bed furniture: Jarvis and Otto were talking together by the mantelpiece.

Standing, for she was not asked to sit down, Mary Barber related what she had come to tell. Barely had she finished when Otto Clanwaring brought down his hand on the table with emphasis, as he turned to his mother and brother.

"That's it. There's the clue. I told you from the first what a shameful wrong it was on Tom to suspect *him*. And you accuse Randy Black!" he added, approaching Mary Barber.

"Sir, I accuse nobody. Randy Black's one I wouldn't like to accuse myself—he might be for drowning me in return—as perhaps he drowned some one else, years ago. I only tell you where I saw him on Saturday evening—coming out of the grounds here in mortal fear. He gave me a plausible reason for his fright—which has nothing to do with it, and don't matter: it mightn't have been true. I couldn't keep this back on my conscience, hearing that you suspect Mr. Tom Clanwaring."

"*I* never did," spoke Otto. "It was too ridiculously absurd to those who knew him."

"Both to those who knew him and to those who didn't," amended Mary Barber. But at this moment Captain Clanwaring stepped forward, putting aside his brother.

"We are much obliged to you, of course, Mrs. Barber, for this information," said he in his pleasantest tones—and the captain's could be soft and pleasant when he chose to make them so. "It is very good of you to come. But now—will you add to the obligation by keeping this doubt about Randy Black to yourself, at least, until it has been inquired into? The fact is," he added, meeting the woman's questioning eyes, and speaking slowly, as if with reluctance, "that my suspicions have been directed to a different quarter."

"Do you mean to Mr. Tom?" independently demanded Mary Barber.

"Oh dear, no. We are sure it was not he." And as the words fell from Jarvis's lips, Otto, in the background, looked hard at his brother.

"Well, Captain Clanwaring, as to keeping my doubts of

Black to myself, I'll readily promise you that, for it's just what I mean to do," answered Mary Barber. "I don't say the man was guilty; he might not have been nigh Sir Dene's window: I must leave you to be the judge of that. Seeing him where I did, rushing pell-mell down the path, in mortal fright, it was my duty to let you know of it. That's all."

"But—how did he account for this state of fear himself?" interrupted Otto. "Surely you may tell us that, Mrs. Barber."

"Well, Mr. Otto, what he told me was, that he had seen something to frighten him amidst the trees," she rejoined, after a slight pause. "As I say, it might have been just an invention of his own. Good-day to your ladyship; good-day to you, sirs."

Lady Lydia nodded in reply to the salutation: she had not spoken one word throughout the interview. Otto civilly went to the front-door with Mary Barber, and she made him a curtsy as she took up her basket and departed. Short though the interval was before Otto returned to the library, he found his mother and Jarvis almost disputing. On my lady's mind there rested not a doubt that the offender was Black: her son would not admit it.

"This must be kept from every one, Otto," spoke Jarvis, wheeling round on his brother. "From Sir Dene especially."

"And why?" asked Otto honestly. "I should take it to Sir Dene at once, and clear Tom."

"Tom shall so far be cleared with him, never fear. In fact, Sir Dene's own mind has cleared him already. Look here, Otto: I must beg of you not to interfere in this. It is essential to me—I have been telling my mother so—not to exasperate Black just now. The fact is," added Jarvis, mentally anathematising his brother's straightforward turn of mind, "I owe Black money, and can't pay him; and I believe he'd do me an ill turn were the opportunity afforded him. If we accuse him of this, it would bring on an inconvenient climax for me, for he'd be safe to come off to Sir Dene with the debt. I wish the devil had all the money!"

"What do you owe Black money for?" asked Otto, in some slight wonder.

"Tobacco," shortly answered Jarvis. "A tough score. Been accumulating for ages."

Otto knitted his brow. In his heart of hearts he despised his spendthrift brother; it might be detected in his voice as he spoke.

"It is no just reason for the information this woman has given us being withheld from Sir Dene."

"That's only reason the first, and quite personal," resumed Jarvis. "There is another and a weightier reason. I don't believe Black had anything to do with taking the bag. I suspect some one else—you heard me say so just now—and I want to follow up the suspicion privately. Accuse Black wrongfully, and he is sure to make a row over it, and my efforts will be defeated."

"But who do you suspect, Jarvis?" cried Lady Lydia impatiently. And the barrister's eyes were asking the same question. ;

"Just at present I cannot tell you, from the same motive. Be content to leave it with me for a little while, mother—and I'll do my best to unravel it. It is a man you would never think of—nor Otto either. Of course, I may be mistaken; but I have just a little clue, and I want to follow it up. It will take time—and not a word must be said. As to Black, it was certainly not he. Bad as the man's character is, in this I could almost answer for his innocence. Accuse him wrongfully, and he'd come straight off to Sir Dene in revenge and tell him of the heaps of tobacco I've had, and the long amount I owe for it. There's brandy as well. Sir Dene—you know the awful fuss he makes about our keeping clear of debt round about here—is put out with me as it is: and he might just send me adrift as he has sent Tom. On my honour I have reason to believe it was not Black; and I ask you, as a favour to myself, Otto, to bury what the woman has said in silence."

That Captain Clanwaring was terribly in earnest in this request, moved almost to agitation, both his hearers saw. My lady heartily gave into it without further questioning, and told him it should drop. Otto tacitly did the same, mentally washing his hands of the affair altogether. It was nothing to him personally: and at the end of the week he was going back to his work in London.



## CHAPTER VII.

## RETRIBUTION.

PACING the two rooms with slow and measured steps, from bed-chamber to sitting-room, from sitting-room to bed-chamber, his air not only that of a man preoccupied, but as if utterly weary of life, went Sir Dene Clanwaring. Time was telling on him. Life and its events were telling on him. Is it true that, according as our course has been smooth and easy, imposing no check on our own imperious will and pleasure, so will a period more or less dark, more or less short, set in before life shall finally close? It had certainly been the case with Sir Dene.

That he had keenly felt his wife's death years ago, and his favourite son Geoffry's death close upon it, was indisputable. But these are events of a class that we cannot avert, coming direct from God; we recognise them as such, and the wounds heal again. With these two exceptions, Sir Dene's life had been altogether one of prosperity and enjoyment. He reigned supreme in his own neighbourhood; took his pleasure abroad at will, in the metropolis or elsewhere; possessed an ample income; no trouble disturbed him. And this desirable state of things continued until he was past his seventieth year. If ever and anon at odd moments a thorn pricked his conscience touching that old affair connected with the widow Barber, it soon disappeared again. But, almost in proportion to the extreme ease of his long life, so had been the discomfort of the past year or two.

Nearly all Sir Dene's love had been concentrated on his granddaughter, Margaret, the eldest child and only daughter of his eldest son. In her earlier years, when she was not strong in health, and it had appeared doubtful whether she would live, the physicians had recommended that she should be always in country air; therefore Beechhurst Dene became almost entirely her home. She was a fair, gentle girl, warm-hearted, a favourite with all. How deeply Sir Dene loved her, he was perhaps himself not conscious of until all was over. Tom was very

dear to him, but not so dear as Margaret. As a rule, men never experience the same fondness for boys that they do for girls. It was Margaret who made Sir Dene's home bright as an ever-present sunbeam; he grew at last not to care to leave it, because she was there. In age there was not much difference between the two children, Tom being a few months the elder.

The end came one day in January, two years ago this very month, when she was in her twenty-second year. Sir Dene was recalling it all as he paced the carpet. He was busy in his parlour with Mr. Tillett, who had come over from Harebell Farm to pay his rent, when Margaret's bright face appeared at the door, a fair vision of sweetness and beauty. She wore a blue velvet gipsy hat, and her overdress was of soft blue cashmere trimmed with ermine.

"We are going, grandpapa," she said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, my darling," responded Sir Dene, kissing her. "Don't stay out too long."

A young girl of sixteen, Charlotte Scrope, was visiting at the Dene, and Margaret was about to drive her as far as Henwick to see her governess—a suburb of Worcester where Miss Scrope went to school, a matter of two miles or so from Beechhurst Dene. It was not the custom for ladies to ride on horseback in those days; the few who did so were called masculine; but they sometimes drove a chaise or small carriage in the country for convenience' sake. It was a fine, clear morning, the roads frosty, as the pony-carriage passed out of the Dene, Margaret driving, and a mounted groom behind them.

In the field skirting Dene Hollow, the field that had once been the widow Barber's, Sir Dene's team was ploughing. Tom Clanwaring, riding through it on horseback, halted to say something to the ploughman, and as the man whose face was turned towards the road, looked up to answer, his words faltered and his eyes dilated.

"Hullo! What's up? Look yonder, sir!"

Tom turned, and was just in time to see the pony-carriage racing away as if for its life; just in time to see some one spring from it, and fall in the road. He was off his horse, had leaped

the railings, and was beside Margaret—for it was she who had fallen—almost as quickly.

She lay quite still in her blue garments, her lifeless face white as snow. Tom raised her in his arms, but the head fell back. Afraid, he dared not think of what, he knelt down and let the poor head rest upon him, and, lifting his own white face, shouted to the ploughman to mount his horse and gallop to the Dene.

The pony stopped presently of its own accord. Charlotte Scrope, who had sat still, was neither injured nor, she acknowledged, much frightened. The groom, leading the pony back again, the young girl still in her seat, said he could not imagine what had caused the pony to back suddenly, and then spring off at a gallop.

“I cannot imagine why Margaret should have been so frightened as to jump out,” cried Miss Scrope. “Has she fainted, Mr. Clanwaring?”

Alas! it was worse than fainting. Margaret was dead. Her neck was broken. But there were two things that remained a marvel to thoughtful minds: why, as Charlotte Scrope remarked, she should have jumped out at all; and why, jumping from that low carriage, her neck should have broken. Mr. Priar talked rather learnedly, giving suppositions, but people wondered for all that.

Sir Dene came speeding down with the rest; he could hasten still, for all his more than seventy years, and the first thing that particularly caught his eye was the piteous aspect of Tom's face. It startled him.

“She's not much hurt, Tom?”

“I—I—better not disturb her, sir,” was Tom's distressed answer. “We must get her home.”

Seven days afterwards, as Sir Dene Clanwaring stood beside her grave in Hurst Leet churchyard, the thought that had been making itself more or less heard all the week, came rushing full upon him with overwhelming force. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, read the clergyman. Ay, but Sir Dene surely saw, and took home to himself, the one great fact that the curse of retribution lay on Dene Hollow; and that this culminating punishment had come direct from God. The sudden loss of this

favourite and most beautiful flower, solace of his declining life, was only the righteous judgment of Heaven. The conviction of his mistake and folly and sin came home to Sir Dene as he stood over Margaret's grave. It was retribution, he groaned in spirit ; the curse working itself out.

From that hour Sir Dene was a changed man. The happiness in his days seemed to have dried up and withered ; the apples had turned to dead-sea fruit. Instead of carelessly enjoying life he began to see how very near to his own end he must be drawing ; and to realize that he had not, in this short world, been living for, or thinking much of, the eternal life beyond. The shadow of a great sorrow lay ever on his own heart. Sir Dene saw that it would lie there to the end.

The time went on. Instead of shaking off petty cares and annoyances as of yore, they clung to him and told upon him almost unnaturally. There were hours still when he seemed full of life and animation, enjoying the social intercourse with his family as much as ever ; but, on the other hand, there were times of depression, when he could truly say the evil days had come, and he found no pleasure in them.

Such an hour was this. Pacing his carpet with slow and lingering tread, Sir Dene was dwelling on the two great sources at present embittering his life, the one a thing of the past, the other recent—Margaret's death and Tom's ingratitude. He could not have believed that he should feel Tom's departure so keenly, or so ardently have wished him home again. We never know the worth of a thing until we have lost it. Had Tom returned now, thrown himself at Sir Dene's feet and said, "Grandfather, forgive me," Sir Dene would have read him a lecture, stormed a bit, then hugged Tom to himself in very happiness. The sin, be it always understood, was that one Tom had been accused of in conjunction with the young lady at the Trailing Indian. No other rested on the mind of Sir Dene.

It is a keen trial to be deceived in one we have wholly trusted. Sir Dene had trusted Tom ; had believed him to be good and honourable ; and the awakening brought sharp pain with it. Light conduct was not thought very much of in those days, by Sir Dene or by anyone else. It was not that in itself ; but the deception Tom had practised on him ; the fact of having

been very black when he had appeared to be wholly white. If Tom had deceived him in one point, he had perhaps done so in others ; instead of being a young man of honour, open and upright as the day, he must have been a very sly one, argued Sir Dene. And never to have written to him ! Five days now since Tom's departure, and not a line from him. What though he had turned him out with harsh and angry words, Tom ought to have condoned them ; he was a young man, his grandfather an old one. Had Sir Dene been told then that Tom had written and that my lady had suppressed the letter, he had probably turned *her* out in his fury. And there he was, brooding over Tom's sins and ingratitude as he paced the carpet, and lashing himself into a state of rage about it all, when Squire Arde was shown in on his return from Bristol.

"Tom did not take that money, Sir Dene," said the Squire, impulsively, after explaining in two or three words where he had been to, and that he had seen Tom.

"No, that he did not," was Sir Dene's somewhat unexpected answer. "I was enraged against him at the time, Arde, or I should never have thought it. I must have been mad. Poor Geoff was the soul of honour, and Tom takes after him."

"It's a great pity that suspicion was directed against him. Of course he did not take it. But who did ?"

"I don't know. Let us drop the wretched subject. I shan't make any stir about it."

"Are you out of health?" asked Mr. Arde, wondering at the irritability and noticing Sir Dene's look of unusual worry and sorrow.

"I don't know. Out of temper, I certainly am. I miss Tom. Things go wrong without him. That man Weston who has taken his place has been in three times this very day, asking this, that and the other. My life will be bothered out of me. Tom was my right hand, Arde ; I didn't value him when he was here, but now I miss him every minute of the day."

"Have him back again," suggested the Squire.

"Not just yet. My Lady Lydia would say I did it to affront her. There's no denying he *was* insolent to her. And there's that other thing always against him. He forgot himself there."

"But what *is* that other thing?" questioned the Squire, thinking he was about to have his curiosity gratified at last. "Tom declares he knows of nothing."

"Let it pass," cried Sir Dene. "I'll never give utterance to it as long as I live. Tom's been a confounded fool—at present that's all I can say. No, Arde: I can't recall him to Beechhurst Dene."

"Absence and Ireland will do him good," remarked Mr. Arde, soothingly—for he had rarely seen Sir Dene so put out as this. "It will give him experience of the world: and a dose of roughing it is always serviceable to young men. With regard to that money——"

"Hang the money!" roared the old man. "I won't hear any more about the money. But for thinking he had taken it I might never have let him go. Things might have taken a turn at our last interview. I never intended it to be the last—when I gave him instructions and funds for his journey, but close upon that the loss was discovered, and I locked myself up and gave orders to Gander that I was not to be disturbed."

"I was only about to say that some one might have come in through the window, and taken it from the secretary," quietly pursued Mr. Arde. "In my opinion, there's no doubt it went that way; I think Tom has none, either. For all you know, someone may have been hidden amongst the shrubs outside and have actually watched you count the money: watched all that passed."

"Let us say no more, Arde. Of course that's how it went. I wish Parker had been at Coventry before he brought it here that afternoon!"

In all this, Mr. Arde could discern only one prevailing desire: a longing to have Tom back again. The next minute, Sir Dene unconsciously confirmed it.

"Margaret gone; gone in that awful manner; and now he is gone; gone in disgrace! Of what good is my life to me? They were the only two I cared for. Yet he has never written a word to me!—it's too ungrateful, Arde."

Mr. Arde thought of the letter he himself had received from Tom, and wondered. During that interview at Bristol, the



subject was not broached, and Tom did not happen to mention that he had written to his grandfather.

"Has he not written to you, Sir Dene?"

"Not a word. He evidently bears malice, you see, and I didn't think it of him. Or he is ashamed to write. Well, well, let us say no more. Come in at five and eat your dinner with me, Arde. You don't know how lonely I am! We'll have it up here together, you and I."

"Tom shall have a private hint from me not to hurry away from Bristol, and to write to the old man forthwith," mentally decided the Squire, as he accepted the invitation. "In a week's time he'll be back again at Beechhurst Dene."

Would he! The first link in the chain of events, destined to frustrate Squire Arde's good intentions, was woven even as he left Sir Dene's presence.

Turning into the library, to tell them he had been to Bristol, Mr. Arde came upon Otto leaning back in an arm-chair, his feet on the fender, reading some dry law-book. The barrister was going up to London by the morrow's night mail from Worcester: a letter, received that morning, was taking him back a day or two earlier than he had intended to leave. Putting the book down, he rose to shake hands with Mr. Arde.

"I'm heartily glad you've been to see him, Squire," spoke Otto earnestly, as they stood over the fire, and he listened to the details of the journey. "In my opinion, Tom has been shamefully used among us."

"Sir Dene wants him back already; I see that plainly," returned the Squire. "As you say, he has been badly used."

"Fancy his being accused of taking that money!" continued Otto. "Great asses they must all have been to think it!"

"Ay. But now—who could have taken it?"

"Who! Why, Randy Black."

"Randy Black!" echoed Mr. Arde, in amazement.

And the exclamation caused Otto to remember what in the impulse of the moment he had quite forgotten—his brother's earnest injunction not to speak of Mr. Randy. He tried to repair the damage in the best way he could.

"I ought not to have mentioned this," he said dropping

his voice. "Jarvey has some idea in his head as to another man—not Black—and has sworn us all to silence in the interests of justice. Don't let it go any further."

The Squire nodded. "Do you happen to know who the other is?"

"Jarvey won't say: it might defeat inquiry, he thinks. For my own part, I believe it was Black. Not to speak of the man's bad character, appearances are almost conclusively against him."

"Do you object to tell me what they are?"

"Not at all—as I've told you so much. But you must keep counsel."

"Of course," said the Squire. "I wouldn't defeat the ends of justice for the world."

Otto Clanwaring related what had come to their knowledge. About the time the robbery was committed, Randy Black was seen flying down the path leading from the bay-window, in what seemed extreme terror.

"Which terror might of course, have been caused by fear of pursuit—and most probably was," concluded Otto.

"But who saw this?" questioned Mr. Arde.

"Mary Barber. She was coming here, it seems, to borrow something, and met Black in this state. It looks to me like conclusive evidence of his guilt."

Mr. Arde agreed. In his own mind he deemed this evidence perfectly conclusive against Black. "Sir Dene does not know of this?" he asked.

"Not yet. Jarvis wants to follow up his own suspicion quietly: if Sir Dene were told, he would be sure to stir in it, and accuse Black. And that would defeat Jarvis's plans," replied Otto.

"Whoever it may turn out to be, I'll answer for it that it was not Tom Clanwaring," concluded Mr. Arde, as he shook hands to leave.

"I would have answered for that all along—and told them so," returned Otto. "Mind you keep counsel, Squire. Above all, don't betray to Jarvis that I've said anything to you. He'd think at once it was going to be proclaimed to the parish."

Squire Arde went slowly down the front avenue, his hands

in his pockets. Upon arriving at home that day he had found his wife and daughter absent. Not expecting him—in fact, not knowing when he would return, or where he had gone to—they had driven over to spend the day with some friends, living in the neighbourhood of Powick. And now the Squire was debating whether, instead of turning home at once, where no one awaited him, he would not go on to Harebell Farm and question Mary Barber. He felt half inclined to prolong his walk also, as far as the Trailing Indian. It never occurred to him that he might not speak of it to the only person to whom the incident concerning Black was known—Mary Barber herself. Rather, he considered it as a secret between himself and her; one that concerned him in whom they were both interested, and of whose innocence both felt equally sure.

“I’ll go,” decided the Squire. “I’ve plenty of time on my hands, and a longer walk this sharp day will do me no harm. How bitterly cold that homeward journey was!”

“Good-day, Squire. You’re back again, sir!”

The salutation came from Cole, the farrier, who met the Squire as he was wheeling round.

“Just returned,” answered Mr. Arde. “I’ve been to Bristol.”

A light shone in Cole’s eyes. The words revealed that he had been to see Tom Clanwaring.

“Is he really going to Ireland, Squire?”

“That he is, Cole, according to present intentions.”

“What a shame it was, suspecting him about that money.” resumed Cole. “As if Mr. Tom would do dirty work of that sort!”

“Pooh, that was all nonsense,” said the Squire, carelessly. “It’s known it wasn’t him.”

“Ay, or else I might have put a spoke in the wheel for him myself,” returned Cole, in significant tones that caught the Squire’s ear. “I saw somebody that same evening not a hundred mile off Sir Dene’s bay-parlour.”

“I know!” cried the Squire, incautiously. “It was Randy Black.”

Cole glanced keenly at the Squire, as if in slight surprise; and then his eyes went straight out into the horizon. It was

only that morning that he had received Tom Clanwaring's letter, enjoining silence.

"As to Randy Black, if all tales be true, he's capable of worse things than stealing money," returned the farrier, carelessly. "But I'm not going to mix myself up in his affairs. Good-day, Squire."

"Good-day to you, Cole."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### GONE.

"ALL of a shake, he was, and his face whiter than this kerchief," said Mary Barber, in answer to Mr. Arde's confidential questionings, as she stood, cloth in hand, her gown drawn through its pocket-hole; for he had disturbed her when she was hard at work in the best parlour, "bees-waxing" the bright old mahogany furniture.

"There can't be a doubt that he had been after that money," returned the Squire. "The very absurdity of his excuse that he had seen Robert Owen—would be sufficient evidence, without anything else."

Mary Barber did not immediately reply. Dwelling very much upon the matter as she had done since her visit to Beechhurst Dene, she had come to a somewhat different conclusion from that which she had first drawn.

"Squire Arde, I do think he saw the poor master, or fancied he saw him, for——"

"How can you talk such nonsense?" interrupted Mr. Arde—who had never liked the report from the beginning. "I thought that fools' gossip had died out long ago."

"So did I," equably returned Mary Barber. "But it seems it hasn't: though what on earth can bring him walking again is more than I can tell. Squire Arde, Randy Black's terror last Saturday night was real; and I believe it was caused by what he said. The fear of the supernatural is different from all other fear—from the fear of pursuit for instance. Had

Black been running from an ordinary foe, he'd have been flying stealthily, with steps hardly touching the ground for fear of being heard ; not with a great sound and noise as he was."

She paused, and gave a moment's vigorous rub to the table, as if to enforce the argument. Squire Arde stood knitting his brow.

"Randy Black would no more have betrayed that fear to living man or woman, than he'd confess to thieving," resumed Mary Barber. "He was quite beside himself with fright ! If he'd only been stealing money, would he have given Jack Pound's boy sixpence to walk up Harebell Lane with him, because he didn't dare to go alone ? No, sir ; he'd sooner have slunk off, and hidden away from pursuit. Randy Black saw the old master on Saturday night, Squire," she concluded emphatically, "or thought he saw him, as sure as my name's Mary Barber."

"All the same he might have helped himself to the money."

"He *might* have done so," she answered, "but I don't feel as sure of it as I did in the first hearing of the matter. Time will tell, sir."

And somehow, Mr. Arde, a rather impressionable man, did not feel so sure of it, either. Instead of returning home on leaving the farm, he walked across the fields towards the Trailing Indian. The path between the grove and the fence, whence poor Robert Owen had fallen, as was supposed ; the pond in the lane beneath ; the old cowshed in the two-acre meadow—all were just as they had been a quarter-of-a-century before. Squire Arde passing the familiar objects, cast his thoughts back to that bygone time. He remembered, as though it had taken place yesterday, the visit he and his relative, the quaint old Squire, and Geoffry Clanwaring had made to the Trailing Indian the day after Robert Owen's disappearance, and his own vague doubts of Black. If the landlord had really had any hand in Mr. Owen's death, it might account for these fits of superstitious terror that occasionally assailed him.

Silent and deserted as usual looked the Trailing Indian when Mr. Arde approached it. But no sooner had he entered

the yard-gate than a stout young fellow of eighteen, Sam Pound, came rushing out of the stable. His smock-frock was rolled up, he wore no hat, and he had altogether the air of being at home and at work.

The Pounds were sufficient to puzzle people—there was such a flock of them. John and Matty Pound, at whose cottage, as may be remembered, the widow Barber died, had fifteen children. This young man, Sam, was the youngest of all; Jack, the eldest was father of the little lad who was carter's boy at Harebell Farm.

"Is it you, Sam?" exclaimed Mr. Arde. "What are you doing here?"

"I be come to live up here, Squire," was the answer—and the young man appeared proud of his promotion, and pulled his hair. "That there stable be in a rare mess, so I were cleaning it out a bit."

"Come to live here?" repeated the Squire, thinking it strange Black should take on a man when so little business was done. "Are you to be ostler?"

"Man of all work, indoors and out. Randy Black sent for old feyther to come up yesterday, and they made the bargain atween 'em. Five pound a-year I be to earn and my wit's and lodging. There be nobody but me to do nothing for 'em nohow," added Sam Pound volubly. "Landlord, he be bad of his cough; missis, her's bad too; and Miss Geach have been and went off."

"Where's she gone to? and what for?" questioned the Squire.

"Well, I take it her didn't care to stay no longer i' the face and eyes o' folks," returned the shrewd young man. "After cocketing herself up above the parish all these mortal years, and turning up of her nose at decent, hard-working young men like our Jim, a fine market she've brought her pigs to. And Jim, he's doing better than any on us, and could ha' given her a good home, wi' a side o' bacon in't!"

"But where's she gone to?" repeated Mr. Arde.

Sam Pound shook his head to express his ignorance upon the point.

"Her stopped the stage-coach as it druv along the highway



yonder yester morn, missis says, got up atop, and sot herself down on 't; her, and her box o' clothes alongside of her."

The first object Mr. Arde saw on entering the inn was Black himself, groaning and coughing over the kitchen fire. Whether disregard of the doctor's injunction to remain indoors, had brought on a relapse, or whether the adventure in the Dene grounds was telling on his nerves, certain it was that the man looked ominously ill. The poor ailing wife, worse than usual that day, was in bed upstairs. Mr. Arde sat down, his substantial umbrella held out before him.

Now, Squire Arde had not gone to the inn to accuse Black of the theft; rather, he intended, by a series of delicate pumpings, to glean what he could, and form his own judgment of things. But almost at the very outset, he found himself foiled. Black evidently could not understand him; and when Mr. Arde spoke out more plainly, the man's surprise was so great, and apparently so genuine, that Mr. Arde was fairly puzzled.

"Don't you know that Sir Dene lost a bag of money out of his secretary on Saturday night?" pursued Mr. Arde.

"I never knew a word of it," returned Black, emphatically, turning his face—white from illness—full on the Squire's—and for once face and tones seemed truthful as an honest man's. "What sort of bag was it—how much money had it got in it?"

"It was just a little sample barley-bag; and the sum was forty-five pounds," replied the Squire, returning gaze for gaze.

Black slowly turned his eyes on the kitchen fire, and seemed lost in thought. It must be owned that he had not the air of a guilty man.

"Hearing that you were met flying out of the grounds about the same time, Black, I was wondering whether you had seen anything of the robbery," continued Mr. Arde, thinking he was opening up the question with great finesse. "Any suspicious-looking people round the bay-window, for instance?"

Black shook his head. "I wasn't nigh the bay-window, Squire. I never got more than half-way up the path towards it."

"What put you into that state of fear, then? You had, I believe, all the appearance of a man flying from pursuit."

"Because I got a fright, Squire; it don't matter how. I——"

Black stopped and looked at his visitor questioningly, the sickly face growing a little darker. Mr. Arde thought the man had suddenly divined that he was suspected of this thing.

"I had a fright," he repeated sullenly.

"Fancying you saw Mr. Owen's ghost!"

"Did you hear that from Mary Barber, sir?" questioned Black, after a pause.

"Well—yes; that's near enough. What a foolish coward you must be, to fancy anything so ridiculous!"

"I saw him as plain as I see you at this moment, Squire," cried Black, excitedly. "He stood in the pathway right in front of me, and I was close against him before I knew what was standing there in the dusk. I swear I saw him, and would swear it if 'twas my last breath."

Even now the recollection seemed too much for Randy Black. Mr. Arde could only look at him. For some moments nothing was heard but the ticking of the eight-day clock, standing in its upright case against the wall by the chimney-piece.

"Never a thing did I see in the grounds but the ghost of Robert Owen," resumed Black, with the same earnestness, but with less excitement. "Nothing frightened me but that. As to the theft from Sir Dene's parlour, I saw nothing of it nor anybody about to help themselves to it. And I'll take my oath I never heard of the loss till this minute."

Had it been any one but Black, the Squire would have given this the most implicit credence. Being Black, he knew not what to think. A question suddenly occurred to him after he had risen to depart.

"What brought you in the Beechhurst Dene grounds at all, Black?"

"I was going to ask leave to speak to Captain Clanwaring," replied the man, readily. "He's owing me a trifle for 'baccy; and I thought I'd go across, and ask him for it."

A very reasonable plea, presenting neither doubt nor difficulty to the mind of Mr. Arde. Sometimes he owed for tobacco himself at the Trailing Indian.

"I hear that Emma Geach has gone away," he remarked, door in hand.

"Drat her, yes!—and I be glad of it," exploded Black, in

very different tones. "I'd sooner have her room than her company."

"Where's she gone to?"

"She didn't tell me. Took French leave, and was off before I was out of bed! Let her go where she will, the baggage!"

A sense of failure in the result of his expedition lay on Squire Arde's mind as he and his umbrella went down Harebell Lane.

"I don't know what to believe," he said to himself. "Every word the man spoke seemed true. But then—who can trust Black? But for Otto Clanwaring's injunction to be silent, I'd ask the captain who he suspects. As it is—well, it's useless for *me* to meddle any further in it. Tom's exonerated, and so let it go."

Sir Dene and the Squire spent a pleasant evening together, Gander waiting on them. Sir Dene avoided the topic of Tom Clanwaring (and indeed all topics connected with home troubles), but ever and anon a chance word would drop from him inadvertently, by which Mr. Arde gathered how much Tom was missed. At nine o'clock he took leave, for the host was weary, and wanted to go to rest.

"Sir Dene feels Tom's absence very deeply," innocently remarked the Squire to Lady Lydia, when he looked into the drawing-room, where she was sitting alone. Captain Clanwaring and Mrs. Letsom were dining out; Otto had gone off to post a letter. "Sir Dene wants him back again."

"Wants him back again!" repeated my lady, dropping her knitting.

"That he does," cried the blundering Squire, who could never see an inch beyond his nose. "I think we shall have him here, too, before a week has gone by."

Every drop of blood in Lady Lydia's veins seemed to stand still as she listened. Have the scapegrace back again!—after all her trouble! But she was a thorough diplomatist; and she smiled on the Squire as he stood before her.

"You have been to Bristol to see him, I hear."

"Ay, I thought I'd better go. And really, Lady Lydia, I must say, I think he has been sent away unjustly. Tom

assured me that he had done nothing to merit expulsion, as far as he knew."

"You are so kind-hearted, Squire ; and so unsuspecting ! Of course, Tom Clanwaring would not proclaim his naughty deeds to you."

"The question, my lady, is—has he been guilty of any ?" was the somewhat blunt retort.

Standing beside him on the hearthrug, glancing round as if to make sure that they were indeed alone, her voice low, my lady breathed into the Squire's ear a whisper concerning Miss Emma Geach.

"No !" broke out the Squire. "That never was Tom."

"Yes, it was Tom." And then she related what she had heard from Otto. Woven into a tale (as she had been weaving it in her mind this past week) it seemed a history of absolute proofs, one fitting into another. Lady Lydia fully believed in it.

The Squire gave vent to a long, dismal whistle. "I'd never have thought it of him," he cried. "What a confounded hypocrite he must be !"

"Believe me, dear Mr. Arde, it is better that he should be away from here," she plaintively said. "Better for the peace of this house ; better for that miserable girl at the Trailing Indian ; better for you ; especially better for your daughter. Rely upon it, all things are ordered for the best."

"What difference does it make to my daughter ?" demanded Mr. Arde, opening his eyes at the remark.

"Ah—what, indeed ! But perhaps I ought not to speak out so fully," she added, in her candour. "I should not to any one but yourself. He was a presuming, designing villain, dear Mr. Arde. He dared to fall in love with May—there's no doubt about it ; he dared to cherish the prospect of making her his wife. Yes, even he, Mr. Tom Clanwaring !"

The Squire's eyes dilated : the Squire's eyes grew round with horror.

"Make up to Miss Arde—to my daughter !" he stuttered. Why, the fellow must possess the impudence of Belial ! Is he mad ?

"But that your own eyes must have been withheld, you would have seen it yourself," she said. "I think Mrs. Arde

saw it. 'There's no knowing what he might have beguiled May into, had he remained—a secret marriage, possibly: girls are innocent and persuadable. Secret marriages run in his race, you know.'

It was a side shaft at poor dead Geoffry and Maria. Mr. Arde, overwhelmed with conflicting feelings, wondered whether he was awake or sleeping.

"Believe me, Squire, it is good for us all that he should be at a safe distance. Once in Ireland, the sea will flow between us. *Let him stay there.*"

Squire Arde acquiesced with his whole heart, and with a few strong words into the bargain. He would have moved heaven and earth now to keep Tom Clanwaring and danger away, rather than help to recall him. *His* daughter coveted by him! He began to see that he *was* a scapegrace, and nothing less: began to think it likely that he *had* taken that money; all the enormities of which Tom Clanwaring had been accused found a willing echo in his mind. So prone is frail human nature to be swayed by self-interest.

Going down the avenue on his way home, and stamping as he went, as if to shake the snowflakes from his boots, in reality to stamp off his indignation, whom should he meet just before he reached the lodge but Otto Clanwaring. In a few angry words the Squire stormed out the news he had heard, and compared Tom to the arch-enemy.

"Confound it! I wish I had been dumb before I ever mentioned the thing," was Otto's sharp retort. "We are none of us so immaculate ourselves, Squire, I dare say. As to the Geach girl and her native impudence, *she's* not much to make an outcry over."

"It isn't that," foamed the Squire: "it's the hypocrisy of the fellow altogether. I believed in him almost as I believed in myself, Otto Clanwaring."

And away he went; stamping furiously through the snow-storm.

## CHAPTER IX.

## SELLING OUT.

THE days and weeks went on, and Tom Clanwaring's departure grew into a thing of the past. Tom was in Ireland, hard at work, filling a post that was no sinecure. He had been active on his grandfather's estate, but had a great deal more to do now; and his responsibility was greatly increased. The rumour that he had stood in the relation of sweetheart to Miss Emma Geach had become public property, and Hurst Leet concluded that Sir Dene had banished him by way of punishment. Considering the light estimation that little indiscretions were then held in, and the lighter estimation given to Miss Geach, Hurst Leet came to the conclusion that the punishment was more severe than it need have been.

In January, when Otto Clanwaring returned to London, the captain ran up with him, having, as he said, business to take him there. But Jarvis was soon back again. Sir Dene, responding to some dexterous persuasion of my lady's, helped Captain Clanwaring temporarily with a tolerably fair sum. It ought to have set him on his legs. Perhaps every one thought it had, excepting the captain and his creditors.

In one thing the wise captain showed himself unwise as a child. No sooner was he down at Beechhurst Dene again, than he made an offer of his hand and heart to Mary Arde. Tom had not been gone three weeks; the remembrance of him and his scarcely disguised love was very present with May; and Captain Jarvis Clanwaring's own sense might have told him this. May refused him, with a few pretty words of thanks. What else could he expect? Privately cursing his precipitancy the gallant captain made her a bland speech, intimating that his love for her could never die; and that he was willing to wait and work for her as Jacob—to whom he compared himself—had done for Rachel, and think it no hardship. To this May replied that she begged he would not think of waiting for *her*; she had made up her mind not to marry at all. They parted good friends, apparently on the same terms they had always been.



After this, Captain Clanwaring divided his time pretty equally between London and Beechhurst Dene. No lover could ever have paid his addresses more silently and unobtrusively than did he to May, hoping thereby to rectify his first mistake. Not a day passed that he was not at the Hall : but he pressed no more attention on May than he did on her mother. Having made up his mind to win her, win her he would, but he knew that it could not be done by storm. Lady Lydia did her best for him, especially with Mr. and Mrs. Arde.

And in Mr. Arde's fear lest his daughter should be beguiled by Tom Clanwaring and bestow herself and her dowry upon so miserable a scapegrace, he looked with something like favour on the pretensions of Jarvis Clanwaring. Captain Clanwaring was no favourite of his : he had disliked him as a boy, he did not like him as a man ; and he would not have preferred a soldier for May. Still, the captain seemed very desirable by the side of Tom. We estimate all things by comparison, and shall do so as long as the world lasts. Mr. Arde knew no particular ill of Captain Clanwaring. It was generally believed that he had a few debts ; but debt was so common an appendage in that day to young men of fashion that Mr. Arde did not give them a second thought. Lady Lydia whispered that Jarvis would inherit most of Sir Dene's savings, and all her own. What her savings might be, or whence they came, she did not state : but Mr. and Mrs. Arde, honest and single-minded, never doubted her word.

To his wife, and his wife alone, Mr. Arde had whispered the tale of Tom's evil-doings, the incredible manner in which they had been deceived in him, and the infamous hypocrisy he must have carried on. Stamping home that January night through the snow-storm, he found his wife, just returned, sitting over the fire in her bed-room, and he told her all. Mrs. Arde was greatly shocked. She had highly esteemed Tom : putting aside that fear as to her daughter, she liked him excessively and could not at first credit the tale. Her husband assured her it was positively true, having no doubt about it himself. They agreed to keep from May a tale so unsuited to her ears. It was never to be breathed to her, except in extreme necessity.

May gathered that Tom had done something or other frightfully wrong—a great deal worse than having knocked down Captain Clanwaring in anger; but when she asked her mother what it was, Mrs. Arde replied that it would not bear discussion.

One word here about Miss Emma Geach. She was supposed to be hiding her diminished head in some convenient shelter, near or distant; taking rest, and gathering fresh strength against the time when she should come forth again to adorn the world. That she would come, and live amongst them as usual, Hurst Leet never doubted. And thus the time went on.

The next news was that Captain Clanwaring had sold out of the army. Lady Lydia was the first to carry the tidings to Arde Hall; Jarvis being in London completing the negotiations. Two causes had induced him to take the step, she said: the one, that he could not bear to separate from May—as he must have done, for he was unable to obtain a further extension of leave; the other, that he knew Mr. Arde would approve of the step. In reference to May, Mr. Arde certainly would do so but he observed to Lady Lydia that he thought it a pity to have sold out; young men were much better occupied than idle.

The same reasons were assigned to Sir Dene Clanwaring, upon whom the news came with intense surprise. Sir Dene was rapidly failing in health. Mind and body were now so weakened that a state of something like apathy had set in; and he rarely took much notice of anything. This selling out of Jarvis's, however, aroused him in an extraordinary degree, and he stormed over it as he had been wont to storm over annoyances in the days gone by. Lady Lydia quietly shut the doors while it lasted, then answered his questions and endeavoured to soothe the tempest. How did the fellow think he was going to live, madly throwing up his profession, demanded Sir Dene; and my lady calmly answered that he was going to marry Squire Arde's daughter, and would succeed to the Hall in the course of time. Sir Dene shook his head, only half convinced as to the wedding project, not at all as to the expediency of selling out—but his physical

powers were unequal to maintaining either anger or contention. Jarvey had left the army because of this contemplated marriage, she urged, and would for the present take up his abode at Beechhurst Dene, making himself useful to his revered grandfather.

Such were my lady's specious whisperings. But what, in all sincere truth, were the inducing facts for his selling out? Simply, that he could not help himself. Captain Clanwaring was so deeply involved in debt that he was obliged to obtain the proceeds of his commission to partially extricate himself; for it would only go half-way to it. Assistance he must have to avoid exposure and disgrace. In some way or other, he had managed to stave off the evil day until now, when it could no longer be staved off by any mortal contrivance known in this world, some of its golden coin excepted. Lady Lydia had absolutely none to give him, and it was of no use asking Sir Dene. My lady had cunningly sounded Sir Dene and found him harder than flint. Not another penny should Jarvis have from him, he said—nay, swore—as he emphatically buttoned up his breeches pockets; he had let him have too much already for his own good. Press it, Lady Lydia dared not; still less might she hint at embarrassment, lest Sir Dene should betray it to Mr. Arde and ruin Jarvis's hopes with May.

So the commission was disposed of, and Captain Clanwaring—retaining his title by courtesy—took up his permanent abode at Beechhurst Dene. Weston, the new superintendent of the estate, had not proved a very efficient successor to Tom Clanwaring. My lady, by dint of prayers and tears, induced Jarvis to ride out on the land once a week, or so, and regaled Sir Dene's ears with dear Jarvis's anxious industry in Sir Dene's interests. Sir Dene took no notice: thoroughly put out with the ex-captain, he was barely civil to him.

Grating ever on Sir Dene's mind was the one bitter fact of Tom's ingratitude. Not a line had he received from him since his departure, and he concluded—what else could he conclude?—that the young man had shaken off the ties and obligations of years as we shake off an old garment when it has served our turn, and abandoned his grandfather. Never was a greater truth written, "Blow, blow, thou wintry wind; thou art

not so unkind as man's ingratitude:" and Sir Dene was feeling it in his heart of hearts.

But now what was the fact of the case? If Tom had written one letter to Sir Dene, he had written ten. All had been confiscated by Lady Lydia as that first one sent from Bristol. At length Tom wrote to Lady Lydia herself, asking how it was he did not hear from Sir Dene, or, indeed, from any one. My lady answered him by return of post. Sir Dene, she represented, was ailing too much to be crossed or troubled. He was still incensed against Tom, and she did not wonder at it, remembering the discomfort he had caused at the Dene. In a parenthesis she added that he could not even bear to see one of Tom's letters arriving, and caused them always to be put in the fire unopened. My lady therefore counselled Tom not to write again.

To suppress letters or to present them to their owners, was an equally easy task for Lady Lydia, since they were delivered at the Dene in a closed bag, of which she now kept the key.

Another person Tom had written to again was Mr. Arde. When he had been about a fortnight in Ireland, he wrote to tell him what the place was like, what he had to do, and so on; and once more thanked him for his unexpected liberality. Now, what did Squire Arde do on the receipt of this letter? He went into a fury and sent it back again. Snatching up a sheet of paper, he penned a few strong words, commenting on Tom's rascally presumption in daring to address him, forbade him so to offend again, enclosed the letter, and despatched it back to Ireland. So, between them all, Tom was hardly used.

And now things went on swimmingly. Captain Clanwaring was the gayest of the gay. A fairly good-looking man, popular in the county, he made the most of his attractions. The report whispered by Lady Lydia—that her son Jarvis would inherit Sir Dene's unentailed property—the entail of course descending to young Dene—spread everywhere; and people, judging hastily, took it for granted that Jarvis would be rich. Mothers far and near courted Captain Clanwaring; daughters ran wild only for a look from him. He was the cynosure of society; and that, in a country district, and in those long-past

days, implied a great deal. But he had eyes and ears only for May Arde; his tender words, sweetest smiles, and all his fascinations, were lavished upon *her*. Mrs. Arde favoured the captain's pretensions far more than did the Squire. Good looks, an irreproachable name (and for all the Squire or any of his friends suspected, the captain's was sufficiently irreproachable), devoted love, the star of fashion are all good things in their way, but they do not altogether compensate for want of an assured position, a settled income, or a certain innate repulsion the Squire could only be conscious of. Yet these objections of his were not absolutely insurmountable. Whoever married May would obtain an immediate income and future position, for Arde Hall would descend to May: and in regard to liking or disliking, that was May's affair more than her father's. Altogether, the Squire was at length brought to say that if May cared for Captain Clanwaring, he would not oppose the marriage. Captain Clanwaring in answer—for the concession was made to him personally—seized the Squire's hands, and thanked him with tears of emotion.

"I think the fellow has some good in him," decided the Squire.

And so, once more, all things being propitious, the captain had another throw with the dice. It was a lovely day in June, and Mary was sitting on the lawn, under the walnut tree, reading a new book. She wore a dress of some thin pink material, its low body and short sleeves, still the fashion, adorned with white lace. Her brown eyes were bright, and her cheeks radiant. Something in the volume had called up the signs of emotion, for the plot put her in mind of her own story and Tom Clanwaring's—a rich heroine's constancy to an impoverished lover. May in her heart was just as constant to Tom, and meant to be so; but the secret was buried five fathoms deep within her breast.

Suddenly, and in the midst of some happy thoughts about Tom, Captain Clanwaring appeared upon the scene. Glancing round in desperate hope of escape, May could only sit on where she was. The captain, decked out in nankeen trousers and all the other fashionable adjuncts of the period, was kissing the tips of his tan-coloured o'love to her, as he advanced,

flourishing his cane. May wished the earth would open and let him in.

Not at all. He came on safely, and sat down beside her. Possibly seduced to it by the sweetness of the summer day—the balmy air, the rich hues of the flowers on which the bees hummed and the butterflies sported, the scent of the new-mown hay in the fields, the universal loveliness of all surrounding things—or perhaps by the winning beauty of May herself. Captain Clanwaring again spoke the few magic words that many another girl in the country might have given her ears to hear. “May, will you be my wife?”

“Oh—thank you—thank you,” responded May, in a desperate flutter. “But—I—can’t.”

“Do you mean that you *won’t*, May?”

“I—can’t—thank you; I don’t want to marry,” stammered May. “Please, Captain Clanwaring, don’t ever say anything about it again.”

She had risen to escape; but he caught her hand and detained her. Holding her before him while he poured forth his love-tale, her face so pretty in its distress, the blushes chasing each other across it, was more than he could withstand; May suddenly found his handsome black moustache bent upon her lips, and a kiss taken. Sharply wrenching her hands from his, with a cry of pain and anger, May broke away from him and escaped indoors.

## CHAPTER X.

### AT REST.

STILL as a statue, her face white and rigid, sat Mary Arde, An old saying tells us that, “Desperate ills require desperate remedies”—and a desperate remedy had just been applied to Mary’s obstinacy. In the vexation brought to Mrs. Arde by her daughter’s second refusal of Captain Clanwaring; in the knowledge that it was caused solely by May’s liking for Tom; Mrs. Arde suffered herself to impart a few hints to her,



which she would have been sorry to do under less urgent circumstances.

It must needs be that the charges, laid for the last few months at the door of Miss Emma Geach, should have reached the ears of Squire Arde's daughter. Not a man, woman, or child in the place but had heard the comments freely bestowed upon that young person's behaviour, and May heard them amongst the rest. But that Miss Emma's divagations could by any possibility concern her, or any of her friends or acquaintances, never crossed the mind of May Arde. How should it do so? May—to confess the truth—had always liked Emma Geach; with May the girl was never impudent, but pleasant and good-natured; and May had thought her very pretty. So that, when she grew to be talked about, May's feeling on the point was one of intense sorrow and very little blame. Indeed, as sensible people remarked, the wonder was, not that the girl had gone wrong now, but that she had kept straight so long amidst the disreputable influences of the Trailing Indian.

Nothing whatever had been heard of Emma Geach since that black January morning when she had abruptly departed by coach. As the months went on, and she did not reappear, people grew tired of expecting her, regarded her prolonged absence as a slight offered to their curiosity, and resented it accordingly. Where was she? What had become of her? Surely she had had time enough and to spare, to repose herself in her retreat! Who was she with?—what was she doing? All the gossips in the parish asked these questions one of another. But for any answer that ensued, they might as well have addressed them to the moon.

Late in spring; nay, at the commencement of summer; a sort of reply did come to them. There arose a rumour that Miss Emma's retreat had been discovered. It was affirmed that she was in Ireland, paying a friendly visit to Mr. Tom Clanwaring.

This clinching assertion could not at first be traced to any one in particular. Z heard it from Y; Y from X; X from W; and so on; but to get all the way back to A, step by step, seemed impossible. At length it was said that the

authority was Black at the Trailing Indian, and that his wife had received a letter from Ireland from Emma Geach. Upon that, all eyes were opened in a most wonderful and convincing manner; and people asked each other how they could have been so obtuse as not to discern that when she went off by stage-coach it must have been because *he* had so gone before, and that she probably went straight to Bristol, the horses' heads being turned that way. High and low, up and down, went this report; to Beechhurst Dene and its sorrowing master; to Mr. and Mrs. Arde; to the village shopkeepers, and the peasants in the hay-fields.

"The girl in Ireland? It cannot be true!" cried Mrs. Arde, aghast.

"Nay, but it is true; there is no doubt about it," replied Lady Lydia—for it was she who had first carried the news to the Hall. "Jarvis went up to the Trailing Indian, and put the question direct to Black."

A charming episode, all this, to relate to May. Or, rather, to hint to her; for Mrs. Arde, respecting her youth and innocence, did not speak out very plainly. And there sat May alone in her chamber after the communication, feeling more dead than alive.

Tom Clanwaring worthless—and *so* worthless! Tom Clanwaring whose love she had fondly thought was given alone to her, and who had, and knew that he had, her whole heart in return! Oh, what a simpleton she had been! What a poor deluded simpleton.

On that Christmas night, barely six months ago, though it seemed ages and ages to May, in looking back—she had been so intensely happy as to wonder whether anything in life's sky could ever again be overcast; now, sitting in her chamber, with utter despair in her heart, she felt that life, no matter how long it might endure, would never again possess one ray of brightness for her.

"Poor child!" exclaimed sympathizing Susan Cole, who divined the nature of the interview between mother and daughter as keenly as though she had made a third at it. "It's too bad of missis to have told you *that* story!"

May looked up with a start, shivering and hectic. She

could not have spoken openly of the trouble for the whole world, and would have died rather than allow the world to know how it was trying her. But, to this woman, who had nursed, scolded, and kissed her in infancy, her heart yearned for what none could impart—consolation.

"I don't think you know anything about it, Susan," she said, speaking in the lightest of tones. "I don't know what you mean."

"Not know! Why, Miss May, every soul in the parish has known about it for months past. After keeping it from you so long, I say it might have been kept always."

"It can't be true, Susan!"

"Miss May, don't go against common sense," reprimanded Susan. "Facts are facts, and now that you've heard them, it's of no use shutting your eyes to the truth. Nobody in the whole place does, except one: that brother of mine, down at the forge."

A light as of hope gleamed in May's eyes. "Does *he* not believe it, Susan?"

"Harry Cole! Not he. If he saw Mr. Tom Clanwaring setting his neighbour's rick on fire, Harry Cole would shut his eyes, and believe him all the more. He swears by Mr. Tom Clanwaring, Miss May."

"Do *you* believe it, Susan?" breathed May, quite hating herself for stooping to the question. But, in great misery, it is something even to catch at a straw.

"I should be soft if I didn't, Miss May."

"It is very dreadful," sighed May.

"Oh well, of course it *is*, Miss May; but young men will be young men, all the world over. For the most part, you may trust 'em just as far as you can see 'em. I'll be bound poor Mr. Tom had a rare example set him by Captain Clanwaring," continued Susan, tossing her head. "The one manages to keep things quiet, and the other manages to get found out; that's the chief difference, I expect, Miss May."

Susan whirled out of the room with as little ceremony as she had whirled into it. May sat on with her sorrow.

But presently a reaction set in. All the deep regard and esteem given to Tom Clanwaring for years could not thus be

set aside in one short hour. May began to remember how unjustly Tom Clanwaring had ever been traduced ; and to ask herself what *proof* there was of this new charge ; to doubt whether there could be any at all.

"Susan," she said, when the maid next entered, "all this may be only a made up tale. What proof is there of it?"

"Proof?" returned Susan. "Well, only two people in the place can furnish that, Miss May—Black and his wife at the Trailing Indian."

"How I wish I dare ask them!" thought May in desperation.

For three days and nights May brooded over the question. *Might* she ask them? And what began with "Decidedly not," ended in "I will." During those three days and nights she neither ate nor slept: hope and fear alternated, the latter predominating: and the whole time was as one long mental agony.

Perhaps she might never have gone, but that a singularly good opportunity for doing so presented itself. These opportunities are the occasion of half the good and of half the evil that takes place in the world. On the third day, in the afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Arde went to a dinner-party, a drive of seven miles, leaving May at home alone.

It was one of those lovely summer evenings, when the full moon is rising just as the sun sets. Bright, warm, still, the world seemed to be at rest, under its flood of golden light. Too hot for walking during the day, May had sat in garden-seats and under trees, bearing that hidden weight on her heart. A wish to take a walk now arose suddenly; and with it an impulsive thought that it should be to the Trailing Indian.

"I am going out, Susan," she said in her pretty, imperative way. "Put your things on."

As Susan Cole had no objection to this, but rather the contrary, she obeyed; and they started.

Behold them emerging from the Squire's grounds on the upper road: Miss May in a pretty hat trimmed with a garland of roses, a green parasol held against the light in the west where the sun had set; Susan Cole in her every-day bonnet, the shape of a coal-scuttle, and made of black silk: a spotted kerchief crossed upon her shoulders. May wore some dainty white

frilled affair over her summer muslin, and black lace mittens reaching to the elbows. The young lady turned to the right on reaching the road.

"*That way!*" tartly exclaimed Susan Cole, in accents of surprise. "What on earth for, Miss May?"

"Because I choose to," answered Miss May. "I am going to the Trailing Indian, Susan."

The avowal took Susan by surprise. Personally she had no objection to visit the Trailing Indian; for a word or two of gossip with Black and his wife was better than nothing. But her mood just then was contradictory.

"And what should be taking you to the Trailing Indian, Miss May?"

"I wish to see how poor Mrs. Black is. And," she added, "I shall ask whether that is true that has been said of Mr. Tom Clanwaring."

"And why need you want to know whether it's true or not?" demanded Susan Cole.

"Because I think it is a great shame for people to raise reports behind his back, when he cannot refute them. That's why," cried May, flushing deeply.

"You'd a deal better let it alone, Miss May."

May looked defiant. "And pray why, Susan?"

"Black's the only one in the parish able to confirm the story. Better live on in the doubt, Miss May, than hear there's no doubt about it."

But this was just what May did not intend to do. For, in her heart of hearts, she believed that a word of inquiry would prove Tom innocent instead of guilty.

In silence they proceeded up Harebell Lane, quiet and sombre even in the summer evening, round by the pond, and on to the inn. Seated on a wooden stool before the closed side-door, was Black; while Mr. Sam Pound sauntered about the yard with a moody look on his face and his hands in his pockets. May went up to him.

"How is your wife?" she asked. For Mrs. Black's chronic state of ill-health was such that people rarely failed to inquire after her.

"She bain't no great things, Miss May. She never is."

"We should like to go in and see her," said May, timidly.

"You can't then. She bain't to be seen."

"Where's your manners, Black?" put in Susan Cole, sharply.

"Is that the way you answer the Squire's young lady?"

Randy Black took no notice whatever of this. Stooping, he picked up a dirty pipe that lay on the ground beside him, took some tobacco from his pocket, and began filling it. The man looked somewhat better than he did in the winter; but his sallow face had strangely haggard lines upon it. He was seated so immediately before the door that they could not attempt to enter, unless he moved. Of late, the door facing the road had not been used, and was hardly ever unlocked.

"It's no good your stopping," he suddenly said, just as Susan Cole was on the point of another remonstrance. "The missis is abed, and I'm not going to disturb her at this time of evening." And as Black was a man who always kept to what he said, May knew that all hope of seeing Mrs. Black was over. Susan Cole saw that she looked depressed and disappointed.

"Black," said Susan, diplomatically; "as we are here, I may as well have a word with you about Emma Geach. How was she getting on when you heard from her?"

"'Twasn't me she wrote to; 'twas the missis," ungraciously returned Black.

"Well, how was she?"

"Tolerable, I believe. Baby was dead."

"'Twas a sad pity it should have happened," continued Susan, as if all her sympathies were given to Miss Emma.

Black gave an ungracious grunt. "She made her own bed, and must lie on't."

"And—was Tom Clanwaring really to blame?" asked Susan, in tones so low that even May scarcely caught the words. The young lady suddenly turned away, as though attracted by something in the lane.

"Why, who else should it ha' been?" retorted Black, lifting his eyes in surprise at Susan Cole.

"One was slow to believe it of *him*, you see," she observed with something like a sigh.

"So one is of most folk till they be found out," said Black, pressing the tobacco with his little finger.



"And is it true that she's gone over to that boggy place—Ireland?"

"Where else d'ye suppose she is?"

"And went straight off to Bristol, when she ran away from here?" continued Susan, her own interest growing in the matter.

"I don't know about that," was Black's answer. "She'd hardly be such a fool for fear o' being tracked; and he would never have been such a fool as to let her."

"Anyway, she went to him; then or later."

"Of course she did. And I wish 'em joy of one another's company!"

"Are you going to stay there all night, Susan?" came the voice of Miss Arde at this juncture—and no one had ever heard her speak so sharply. "We must be going homewards."

"So we must, Miss May. Well, good-evening, Black. Tell the missis my young lady called in to ask after her."

Back down the lane, silently as they had come, went they. May's face was white and worn: this confirmation was to her worse than death. In passing the pond, Susan spoke in a half-whisper.

"Miss May, I told you it might be better to let doubt alone."

"No, it is best as it is," she resolutely answered, biting her poor lips to get some colour into them. "Best that the doubt should be set at rest."

Dark and gloomy seemed the lane now; not a glimmer of moonlight shone through the trees: but it was less gloomy than May's heart. They walked on side by side, saying no more.

"Why, Miss May, is that you? Good-evening to you, Susan Cole."

The salutation proceeded from Mary Barber, standing at the gate of Harebell Farm in her white cap and crossed kerchief, that might have been the fellow one to Susan's.

"What are you doing up this way?"

"Taking a walk—'twas impossible to go out in the heat of the day," replied Susan promptly.

"It has been very sultry," assented Mary Barber. "I'm

standing here for a breath of air. The heat's made you look pale, Miss May."

"Has it?" carelessly returned May. "How is Fanny Tillett, Mary?"

"She's nicely, Miss May, I'm obleeged to you. Her two cousins are staying here; the Miss Tilletts from the Wych. Merry-hearted young ladies, both of them: Miss Eliza sings like a nightingale."

The pain at Mary's own heart seemed uppermost just then. She envied the Miss Tilletts.

"Fanny's going back to stay with them when they return," continued Mary Barber. "The master—— Why, who's this clamping down the lane?"

The sound proved to proceed from the heavy hob-nailed boots of Mr. Sam Pound; and as that gentleman made direct for the gate and Mary Barber, he touched his hair to Miss Arde and the company generally.

"Would you please lend 'em the loan of a candle up there, Mrs. Barber?" he asked, indicating the Trailing Indian.

"The loan of a candle!" repeated Mary Barber. "Are you out of candles, Sam Pound?"

"We be. Our last bit burned out i' the night; and the master clean forgot it till just now. He'll get some in to-morrow, and telled me to say so; and ye shall have it back."

Not being particularly interested in the subject, Miss Arde and Susan said good-night, and walked on. Mary Barber stood on at the gate, the fresh air gently fanning her face. Sam looked at her.

"Be you going to lend us that there candle, ma'am?" he asked again in a minute or two; and his tones seemed urgent.

"I'll fetch it directly, Sam Pound. How's the missis?"

Sam Pound looked about before he answered, and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"I think the missis be dying, I do."

"What!" exclaimed the startled woman.

"I do, ma'am. She's been right down bad this two days, just turning about in her bed like one as can't rest. All sorts o' things she's been calling out—about hearses, and diamonds, and lace, and murders; a reg'lar hodge-podge o' words. When

Black found she was talking like that last night, he bundled me downstairs, saying she was off her head. See here," added the lad, "it bain't right for her to die up there all by herself. I don't like it. She's been moaning to-day like anything. I heered it down in the kitchen."

"Has Dr. Priar been fetched to her?" questioned Mary Barber.

"Nobody's been fetched to her: Black says the doctor can't do no good. Fact is," added shrewd Mr. Pound, "Black don't want nobody to hear what she talks of. Do ye mind hearing of a pedlar as was lost up there? 'Twas afore my time."

Mary Barber nodded.

"Last night the missis was raving about him. 'Don't hurt the pedlar! Where be the pedlar? What ha' you done wi' him?' Black turned the colour of a turmit and took to trembling. But—— 'Taint right for her to lie there to die, and not a Chris'n anigh her. Black stumps up a bit now and then, and he've sent me up wi' things to-day: but mostly she's alone, a-moaning like a poor hurted animal."

Mary Barber, making no comment, turned indoors, leaving Sam where he was. She came back with two candles wrapped in paper, her bonnet on.

"Run down to Mr. Priar, Sam Pound, and ask if he'll be so good as to step up to the Trailing Indian, and say I sent ye. I'll take the candles myself."

Sam hesitated. The Trailing Indian might not approve of Mr. Priar, and he would have to bear the blame of it.

"Now, just be off," cried Mary Barber. "The sooner you're gone, the sooner you'll be back again. Don't stand staring, Sam Pound."

Thus urged, Mr. Pound went off on his errand. And Mary Barber made the best of her way to the inn.

It was quite dark within doors, and moonlight without, by the time she entered it. Black, regardless of the heat, had made up a roaring fire in the kitchen, and sat before it in his old wooden arm-chair fast asleep. Seeing him thus, thought prompted Mary Barber not to wake him, but rather to go up quietly to Mrs. Black. A candlestick stood on the table,

ready, no doubt, for the return of Sam Pound. She slipped one of the candles into it; lighted it at the blaze, and stole upstairs.

The sick woman lay on her bed—a low bed in a lean-to room—in utter stillness, and that she had not many hours of life left in her Mary Barber plainly saw. The light of the candle caused her to open her eyes: she looked quite sane now, whatever she might have been in the earlier hours. Mary Barber knelt down, and took the thin crippled hand that lay outside the clothes.

“I’m afraid you are very bad, poor thing,” she said in her least hard tones.

“Ay, but it’s almost over.”

“I’ve sent for Dr. Priar. He’ll be up presently.”

“No good, no good,” said Mrs. Black, feebly shaking her head. “Black would ha’ sent for him had it been o’ use. My time’s come.”

Mary Barber, looking at her countenance, believed it to be true—no doctor could have done her any good this time, or prolonged her days. The dying woman resumed.

“Mine has been a weary life, and I am glad to go. I’d like to ha’ gone years back—but the Lord knows best. I hope He’ll remember what I’ve had to bear here, and give me a little corner in heaven.”

“He will; never fear,” said Mary Barber heartily. “I’ll send for the parson, and he shall say a prayer to you.”

“I’ve said it for myself,” said the woman, closing her eyes. But her feeble fingers held the strong ones gratefully. There was a pause.

“Listen,” said Mary Barber, breaking it, her thoughts recurring to that one great calamity of the past, that was never entirely absent from them long together, although so many years had gone by: “Listen, Mrs. Black. Have you never a word of certainty to say to me about the death of the master?”

Mrs. Black opened her eyes and stared, evidently not understanding. Her perceptions were growing dim.

“My poor old master, Robert Owen of the farm. Did you know at the time anything about his death?”

The meaning was caught now, caught vividly. Mrs. Black's face assumed a look of terror, as she grasped the hand of Mary Barber.

"I've lived in mortal dread of seeing him," she cried ; "I've never dared to go out i' th' gloaming all these years."

"Ah ! But was he murdered ?"

"I don't know. I never did know. Oh, it has been a fearsome life for me—fearing this, fearing that, and knowing naught. I'm glad it's ended."

"Who be that cackling upstairs?" called Black at this moment, his voice not at all the steady voice of a man at ease.

"It's me, Black," said Mary Barber, tartly, going to the head of the staircase. "I've come to see if aught can be done for your wife. Bring up a drop of wine, and some fresh cold water."

Before the astonished Black could find words to growl out his wrath at this summary invasion of his domestic privacy, Mr. Priar came in. Sam Pound had encountered him turning out of the gates of Beechhurst Dene.

But the surgeon could not prolong the life of Black's wife. Her poor, worn spirit, crushed down by trouble and fear, flitted away as the dawn broke in the east.

## CHAPTER XI.

### WHAT OTTO SAW.

IT is said that continual dropping will wear away a stone. During the whole summer, poor Mary Arde, her heart ever bearing its heavy weight in silence, was subjected to a species of amiable persecution, the chief agents in which were her mother and Lady Lydia Clanwaring. The praises of Captain Clanwaring were for ever being said or sung ; the disreputable conduct of the scapegrace Tom was kept in evidence. Not openly : that might have defeated its own ends : merely a hint of this, and of that, something or other ever suggested to his

discredit. Mr. Arde was not quite so active an ally : it was hardly right to let his daughter think there could be no doubt of Tom's catalogue of crimes, stealing the money amongst the rest. Mr. Arde believed quite enough against Tom without allowing her to remain under the impression that Tom was guilty of much that the Squire knew could not be laid to his charge. Self-interest makes many of us blind to deceit : it made Mr. Arde so : and he was on the very brink of incurring a life-long penalty as his reward.

May fought against the influence as long as she could do so ; then yielded to her fate. Yielded so far as to accept Jarvis conditionally and promising to be his wife. The captain was ever near her ; but so kind, so gentle, so unobtrusive in his attentions, that she felt ashamed even tacitly to show that she could not reward his love. A saint might of late have believed in Captain Clanwaring : Mr. and Mrs. Arde sang his praises at all times. May's own feelings prompted her to take the captain in spite of her dislike to him. She was but a woman ; and she longed for a little revenge on Tom, who had been so disgracefully false to her, and allowed young persons to pay him visits in Ireland. It was only in accordance with human nature that she should desire to show the deceiver that she cared for some one else as well as he did, and show him she would, whatever the cost to herself.

It was in September that she accepted Captain Clanwaring. The promise she gave was full of hesitation, her manner provokingly listless. "As good Jarvis Clanwaring as any other, if marriage it must be," was the refrain despair kept beating in her heart. The captain ventured to press for an immediate union ; but here May rebelled : absolutely refusing not only to fix a speedy epoch, but to give an idea as to when any such epoch might be fixed.

Now, nothing upon earth could have been more untoward for the captain ; nothing have caused him greater inconvenience. The proceeds of his commission had kept him afloat for a short time ; but during these summer months he had not known what to do for money. The claims he had been unable to pay pressed more heavily upon him day by day ; and in this month of September his condition had grown desperate. Many an



anxious hour did he and his mother spend together, plotting as to what could be done. Once let an exposure come, and the probability was that May would make use of it as a plea for retracting her promise, and the Squire would uphold her. Lady Lydia was her son's only confidante: and she but a partial one. Jarvis gave her no details; and did not tell her the worst of his embarrassments. My lady had been at her wits' end many a time before, contriving how to do the best for him in his troubles; but never so completely as now, when the prospect of the marriage with May had become a certainty, and must by hook or by crook, be allowed to go on to completion. To draw money from a flint would have been as possible as to obtain it, now or hereafter, from Sir Dene. Nevertheless found it must be, even though desperate means were used.

The bright September sunshine lay on the London streets, as a lumbering hackney coach passed on its way slowly from a fashionable hotel to Lincoln's Inn. It drew up before a door in Old Square; and Captain Clanwaring stepped out of it: his black moustache charmingly curled, his appearance altogether that of a stylish buck of the day.

Throwing his fare to the old coachman—the captain began to toil to the upper chambers of the house, anathematized the stairs a little, and striking his cane once or twice angrily. Arrived at the last flight, a door faced him, bearing a barrister's name—"Mr. Otto Clanwaring,"—on its panels.

Otto worked just as much during the vacation as in term time. Jarvis, going straight in without the ceremony of knocking, found him with a parchment spread out before him on the table, his head bent over it between his hands. Supposing it was only his clerk who had entered, Otto did not look up.

"What a deuce of a way it is, up these stairs, Otto! You must have had another flight added on, since I was here last."

Up went Otto's head. "Why, Jarvis! is it you?"

Laughing a little in his surprise, the barrister rose and held out his hand. Jarvis resigned the tips of his fingers encased in their delicate straw-coloured kid. The contrast between the brothers was remarkable. The one tall, handsome, elegant, attired in the height of fashion; the other, short and plain, his homely grey clothes somewhat shabby.

"How hot you feel up here!" remarked Jarvis, sinking languidly into a chair at the other side of the table.

"Rooms in the roof are always hottest," replied Otto.

"And highest. Why don't you move lower down?"

"This suits my pocket best, Jarvis. When did you come up to town?"

"Night mail," shortly answered Jarvis.

"All well at the Dene?"

"Passably," yawned Jarvis. "Old man gets more crotchety than ever. Shuts himself up in his room for days at a time. Lets nobody in hardly except Gander."

Otto, who had resumed his seat, bent his head on his work again. That Jarvis never troubled his chambers except for some purpose of his own was a fact long since proved: and Otto knew he had only to be quiet to hear it. He would not inquire: not at all approving of these missions of Jarvis. The probability was that he had come to borrow money, or badger him into accepting a bill. In the latter, Jarvis had never yet succeeded: the barrister was too cautious.

Leaning a little forward in his chair, and lightly tapping the table with his cane, sat the captain. Either he had nothing to say, and had actually come from the West End merely to while away an idle moment, or he was taking a long time over it. In flourishing his cane, he happened to tap a letter lying amongst other letters, and the tap flirted it upwards and turned it over. The direction caught his eye, and somewhat awakened it from its lazy indifference.

"That's Tom Clanwaring's writing, Otto?"

Otto quietly looked up. "Yes. I had the letter this morning."

Jarvis curled his lip. "I wonder you suffer him to correspond with you!"

"He is welcome to correspond with me if he likes. However, this is the first letter I have received from him."

Jarvis wished to know what the letter was about, but did not ask. His brother had a civil way of declining information, if it suited him to withhold it. The next moment, Otto spoke; quite readily.

"Tom writes to ask me if I will tell him how things are

going on in his old home. He says he can get no news whatever. No one writes to him."

"What does it concern him how things are going on?" growled Jarvis.

"I suppose he possesses ordinary memory and affection," returned Otto. "The way Tom was treated amongst us all that time was an infernal shame."

"You didn't do much towards it, at any rate," retorted Jarvis. "Given your way, you'd just have shut your eyes to everything, and kept the fellow where he was."

"Of course I would. And I've not forgiven myself yet for having been the means of letting out that report about the Trailing Indian. No, and not forgiven some of the rest of you either, for taking it up in the manner you did. It was a cowardly shame."

"Perhaps you'd like to say it ought to have been hushed up, and the fellow let off scot-free?"

"One man may walk through the field while another may not look over the hedge," remarked Otto. "Had you or I been found out in a bit of a scrape, Jarvis, nothing would have been said about it. Not that I have anything to do with such scrapes, thank goodness."

Which almost sounded as if Jarvis had. The latter answered sharply.

"He had been the bane of the house long enough, and it was time he went out of it."

"Well, I see no reason for his being sent to Coventry, now, in the way you all seem to be sending him. Just an answer to his letters once in a way, telling him how Sir Dene is, would not harm any of you."

Captain Clanwaring threw back his head and waved his scented handkerchief, as if to wave off anything as low as Tom Clanwaring that might come between the wind and his nobility.

"I would not condescend to write to the scapegrace if he were dying. You might employ your leisure better, Otto!"

"It's not the first time my leisure will have been taken up in doing work neglected by others," quietly replied Otto.

"Just as you please, of course," rejoined Jarvis scornfully, as if the subject were altogether beneath him.

A silence ensued. The captain leaned back in his chair, softly whistling. Otto turned over a leaf of his parchment, and made a pencil mark on the margin. Presently he spoke again.

"Has that girl Emma Geach come back, Jarvis?"

"I've not heard of it."

"I wonder where she is."

"Don't know. There was a report in the summer that she was in Ireland."

"Oh," said Otto. And went on with his reading again.

"How is it you've not been down this year?" asked Jarvis, tapping his boot.

"I have had a good bit of work one way or another, and thought I could not do better than stick to it. Holidays run away with both time and money: I cannot well afford either yet. Talking of money, Jarvis, has that thief been discovered yet?"

"What thief?"

"He who stole the bag out of Sir Dene's secretary on New-Year's Day. You were going to follow up some suspicion upon the point. Did you do so?"

"No. At least—I did what I could, but nothing has come to light."

"And nothing will until Black confesses," observed Otto. "He was the thief. If I were down there, and Sir Dene would let me have the handling of it, I'd risk my reputation on bringing it home to the man in a week."

Jarvis leaned his dark face forward, and looked hard at his brother. The indifference on his countenance had given place to what seemed quite like alarm.

"*Don't meddle with it, Otto.* You might do incalculable harm. It was no more Black than it was you or me."

"Have you still an interest in warding suspicion off Black?" questioned Otto.

"I! Why, what interest did I ever have in doing that?" retorted Jarvis, as if he had forgotten so much of the past.

"That tobacco debt of yours."

"Oh—that! Ay, I remember. That has been settled long ago, and a fresh score run up," added Jarvis, lightly laughing.

"See here, Otto," he continued seriously, "I have a private reason of my own for wishing the facts connected with that matter to be brought to light. In my own mind I am as sure who it was as though I had seen the money taken. Give me time and I'll track it home yet."

"Can't you tell me who it was?"

"No. And if I did, it would not particularly interest you."

"Black's wife's dead, I hear."

"Went off two or three months ago," carelessly rejoined Jarvis. "I don't think Black himself will last very long. He seems to be on his last legs."

"And how are the Ardes?" continued Otto, privately wishing his idle brother would take himself away, and leave him to his work. "How's May?"

"They are all right. May is engaged to me."

"No!" exclaimed Otto, darting a quiet glance at the captain.

"She is. Why need you be so surprised?"

"Because, to tell the truth, I thought she'd never consent to have you," said Otto, candidly. But he did not add the other thought that lay in his mind: "She cared only for Tom Clanwaring."

"Much indebted for your good opinion," derisively spoke Jarvis. "She has consented, and so you were wrong, you see. As for me, I'm glad the matter's set at rest: I have been dangling after her long enough."

"I congratulate you, Jarvis. May Arde is the sweetest girl I know."

"Thank you. Yes, the prospect is not bad," complacently continued the captain. "Ten thousand pounds settled on her; ten thousand pounds to be handed over to me on the wedding-day. And all the rest of the property, including the Hall, when the old people fall in."

"A widely different prospect from mine. I shall have to work hard for my bread-and-cheese, and probably have to work to the end," returned Otto, with good-natured cheerfulness. "You were born, I take it, under a luckier star than I, Jarvis."

Jarvis slightly nodded his head, and took another look at his handsome boots. In his opinion there could not be a more

unlucky star than one that entailed work of any sort. They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," cried the barrister.

A little bald-headed gentleman dressed in black, with a broad frill standing out from his shirt-front, and a heavy bunch of seals hanging, answered the mandate.

"I'm glad to find you in, Mr. Clanwaring," he said, standing with the door in his hand. "Don't disturb yourself. The serjeant is obliged to forestall the hour fixed for the consultation, and name an earlier one. Four o'clock instead of six. Will it suit you?"

Otto considered. At four o'clock that afternoon he had intended to proceed elsewhere on business. It was, however, no appointment, and he could take another time for it.

"I suppose it must suit me, Mr. Lake," he said aloud. "Yes. I'll be over at the serjeant's chambers at four."

"That's all, then, Mr. Clanwaring. Four o'clock precisely, please. I've been to the other two. Good-morning."

"That was the great Serjeant Sterndale's chief clerk," observed Otto to his brother. "Lake is the cleverest little man in Lincoln's Inn. Three parts of those written opinions of the serjeant's, so renowned for their depth and wisdom, are his. It's said he gets twelve hundred a year salary."

Silence set in again. Captain Clanwaring was in a brown study; the barrister went on with his parchment. The hot sunshine was lying on the room.

"I am in an awful mess, Otto."

The acknowledgment sounded so strange after the recent declaration of glowing prospects, and perhaps was so unexpected, that Otto looked across as if he hardly believed his ears.

"Debts again?"

Jarvis nodded. "Nearly done to death with them."

"That's what he has come about," thought Otto. "I can't help you, Jarvis," he said aloud, forestalling any request of the sort. "It's as much as I can do to pay my own way."

"No one asked you to," retorted Jarvis. "I believe I shall be able to help myself."

Otto silently wondered how.

"Do you know anything of a man named Pale?"



"Pale, the money-lender? Yes, I know him."

"Had transactions with him yourself, perhaps?" went on Jarvis.

"Never. Not in the way you mean. Why do you ask about him?"

"I want you to tell me, if you can, whether he is a man whose discretion may be depended on. Is he one who would keep a client's counsel?—or would he go blabbing to other people?"

"I should think his discretion might be quite depended on. It's the impression he gives me; but I don't know much about him."

"Might be trusted then, you think?"

"Yes, I do."

"What's his precise line of business?"

"Lending money."

"Of course. But what upon? Post-obits?—promissory notes?—and——"

"Upon anything," interrupted Otto. "All's fish that comes to Pale's net."

"Just what I heard. Has heaps of property in his hands. Plate and diamonds, and things of that kind."

"I dare say. Sure to have."

"Exacts hard terms, no doubt?"

"They all do that. I don't suppose Pale's worse than others. For what he is, they say he is tolerably fair-dealing."

"Where does the man live?"

"His rooms are in Pall Mall."

"A heap of clerks there?" questioned Jarvis, his face assuming a moody look, as if it did not please him that Mr. Pale should have "a heap" of clerks.

"Some, I suppose. I have never been there."

"Why, I understood you to imply that you have done business with him!" exclaimed Jarvis, lifting his eyes.

"My business with him had nothing to do with money-lending. It was of so strictly private a nature that I preferred to find him out at his own residence, rather than go to his business rooms."

Jarvis paused a moment. "Where is his private residence?"

"In Goodman's Fields?"

"Where the deuce is Goodman's Fields?"

"East-end way. Towards Whitechapel."

"Oh," said Jarvis.

"Are you going to borrow money of him, Jarvis?"

"Well, he——" Another pause. "He has been recommended to me as a man likely to lend some. I think I shall try him."

"He'll want first-rate security. I warn you of that."

"As if the fraternity didn't all want that—and be hanged to 'em!" growled Jarvis.

"Shall you be able to give it?"

"I shall give him a bill at three months backed by a good name," replied Jarvis, after stopping to consider whether he should answer the question or not. "An undeniably good name; safe as the Bank of England."

"And how do you propose to take up the bill at the end of three months?"

"With some of the money that will come to me on my marriage. The knot will have been tied before that."

Otto Clanwaring laid down his pencil and looked at his brother. Every feeling of justice within him felt outraged.

"Jarvis—it is of course your business; not mine. But I would suffer any trouble rather than so foredestine Mary Arde's money. It will be desecration."

"She'll never know it. You needn't preach. I should only do it under compulsion."

"Suppose the marriage should never come off?"

Jarvis turned red with anger at the supposition. "Suppose the sun never sets?" said he wrathfully. "Keep your croaking to yourself, Otto. And now—tell me how I am to ferret out this man's house. If I don't find him in Pall Mall, I may go there."

Otto wrote down the directions, his brother standing beside him. "And you think he may be trusted to keep dark?" repeated Jarvis, as he took the addresses.

"Certainly. For that matter, most money-lenders may be trusted. It is to their interest to be silent," added Otto. And the captain departed without the ceremony of saying good-morning.

"Curious he should harp so upon secrecy when secrecy's the rule," thought the barrister, as the other went down. "He must have some special motive for wishing it. I should like to know whose that other name is. Curious, too, that I should be going to pay Pale a visit myself to-day or to-morrow."

But that he was so reticent by nature, and perhaps also that he could not hold his brother in any favour, Otto might have mentioned the latter fact. He was engaged in the friendly office of trying to establish the innocence of a young man upon whom a suspicion of forgery rested. Pale could materially aid him if he would, but to get him to do so was difficult. It was altogether a matter of great delicacy.

The day wore on. At four o'clock, Otto Clanwaring attended the chambers of Mr. Serjeant Sterndale. The consultation lasted until six, after which Otto took his frugal dinner, consisting of lamb cutlets and vegetables, supplied by his laundress. To save cost he lived in his chambers. Then he indulged in his pipe, sitting at the open window in the twilight while he smoked it, and glancing, while he meditated, at the glow left in the western sky by the setting sun.

With his methodical habits, his industry, and his anxiety to employ every minute of his time, the barrister's evenings were generally appropriated beforehand to some work or other. This evening was an exception; changing the consultation hour had thrown things out of their groove. When his pipe was smoked, Otto sat on, feeling himself at liberty for the evening, and accordingly something like a fish out of water.

"Why not go down to Pale's now?" he suddenly exclaimed. "I will. He's almost sure to be at home, and it will save time to-morrow."

Descending the stairs and passing out of the square, he got into the line of principal thoroughfares, preferring their cheerful route to that of the quieter streets. A good many people were abroad that genial evening; hot London strolling out for a breath of air. Half-way down Cheapside there was a stoppage on the pavement, caused by a crowd gathering round a man who had fallen in a fit, real or pretended. Otto was elbowing his way through it, just as a girl was elbowing hers the other way. They met face to face, under the broad glare of a silver-

smith's shop, and Otto Clanwaring exclaimed with surprise. It was Emma Geach.

"Where have you sprung from?—from over the seas?" he asked, the little bit of information given him by Jarvis that day, as to her being in Ireland, flashing into his mind.

"Over the seas or out of the earth," she answered in her ordinary light tones. "How are all the folk in your country, Mr. Clanwaring?"

"What have you been doing with yourself, and where have you been hiding all this time?" returned Otto, passing over her joking question for what it was worth.

"I've been in a trance," said the girl, saucily. "Just come out of it."

"Do you know that your old home has had a loss?" continued Otto, determined to ask no more questions and receive chaffing answers. "Black's wife is dead, poor thing."

"Yes, I know it," replied the girl, voice and face both passing into sadness. "I should have liked to see her again. But she's better off."

"When are you going back to the 'Trailing Indian?'"

"That's amidst the doubtfuls, sir. Maybe sometime, maybe never. I get a bit of news of the old place once in a way; but I don't get much. It has been told me that Sir Dene's breaking fast."

"I fear he is."

"How are the Ardes?" she suddenly asked.

"Oh, they are all well. Miss May's thinking of getting married."

"Is she?" was the remark, evidently given in surprise. "And who to, sir? Young Squire Scrope?"

"Can't tell," shortly returned Otto, for it was by no means his wish to talk of family matters to this damsel: indeed, the remark about May had slipped from him unintentionally. "Are you living in London?"

"I'm lodging in it, just now. And there's my landlady waiting for me, and looking daggers at this hindrance," she added, "for we are in a hurry to get home. Her son met with an accident down at the docks to-day, and she asked me to go with her to see him."

Otto Clanwaring turned and saw a decent woman standing a few paces off. Before he could add another word, Miss Geach had slipped away, and joined her. They passed up Cheapside together, the girl throwing a nod and a good-night to Otto in her freedom. He went on his way, his mind full of the encounter.

"I suppose she has been in Ireland and come back from it," ran his thoughts. "Wherever she may have been she looks well."

Pursuing his route, by the time he reached his destination, which lay in the neighbourhood of Mansel Street, he felt somewhat fagged, and devoutly hoped Mr. Pale would be at home, so that he might not have had his walk for nothing. The money-lender's house was little to look at outwardly, forming the side of a small paved court, the opposite side being a dead wall. The court was no thoroughfare, and no one had any business there, unless it was with Mr. Pale's homestead. In fact it was altogether as retired a place as might be found in the heart of London.

"I think he is at home," said Otto Clanwaring, seeing a light shining behind the white blind of the first window as he turned up the court. For Mr. Pale was a bachelor, and lived alone.

Now, perhaps for the reason that the court was considered sufficiently secluded, or through some carelessness of a servant, the white blind had not been drawn down to its full extent. Venetian blinds ran across the bottom of the window, and the white blind left about three or four inches of space uncovered. The blinds were open, so that the room was exposed to view.

Otto Clanwaring halted, and glanced in. Not from any intention of spying—whatever might be the failings of some of his family in this respect, he was too honest for anything of the sort—but simply to assure himself that the money-lender was in. Yes. There sat Pale, his grey hair close to a brilliant lamp. At the same small round table sat another man, to whom Otto's eyes naturally turned. It was Captain Clanwaring.

It is to be feared that Otto broke into an unorthodox word. Very far indeed was it from his purpose to interfere in any way with his brother's affairs; he would a great deal rather keep

aloof from them, and certainly the possibility that Jarvis might choose this hour for a visit to Mr. Pale had not so much as occurred to him. After all, Otto felt that he might have had his walk for nothing.

"If I thought his business was likely to be soon over, I'd wait about in some back-street and come again after he had left," soliloquized Otto. "It wouldn't do to let him see me; he'd jump to the conclusion that I had come down to spy upon him: Jarvis was always suspicious. Wonder if he'll be long?"

Still with no idea of prying, only to gather a hint, if possible, as to whether the interview was, or was not, coming to an end, Otto looked in again. They were seated facing each other at the table, and very near the window, for the room was small. It almost seemed as if Otto made a third at the meeting, so close and distinct was everything.

He gave a sudden start. A start of simple astonishment in the first place. Mr. Pale, lifting something under the lamp, and gently waving it, a flood of dazzling light flashed forth. Otto recognized the case, with Sir Dene's arms upon it, containing the family diamonds.

Only astonishment at first. It was succeeded by a sensation of dismay, bringing pain and shame with it. Too surely he drew the right conclusion: Jarvis was raising money on the Clanwaring diamonds.

Valuable diamonds. Worth at the least some five or six thousand pounds. They had not seen the light since the death of Sir Dene's wife, so many years ago. They went with the title, and would lapse to young Dene when he should come into it.

"Has he *stolen* them?" wondered Otto, bitterly, wiping from his face the moisture which shame had brought there. But no, only for a moment did he think so ill as that: good sense led him to what was in fact the truth—Lady Lydia had lent them to him in his temporary need. But she must have done it without the cognizance of Sir Dene: so it was not much better than stealing, after all. Otto felt that he would rather have lost his right arm than see this.

The impulse crossed him to go in, denounce Jarvis for a villain, and secure the jewels from desecration. Only for an



instant. He saw how impolitic such a course would be; how much worse it would make it all. No, there was nothing for it but to be silent, to be a tacit party to the transaction, and to hug his shame closely.

He continued looking, and saw no meanness in doing so now. Mr. Pale clasped the case again—Otto heard the sharp click where he stood—put it inside a small bureau, and brought back some bank-notes from the same receptacle. Not many, three or four in all. Then he wrote out a cheque, and handed both cheque and notes to Jarvis. What the amount was Otto could not see, and resented the doubt. The next thing, Jarvis wrote something, of which Pale took possession. This seemed to complete the transaction; Captain Clanwaring rose, and was coming forth.

The barrister glided out of the court, and bolted into the dark passage of a friendly shop that was putting up its shutters. The blow had struck home to the family pride of Otto Clanwaring.

## CHAPTER XII.

### DIPLOMACY.

A GENTLE knocking came to Sir Dene's chamber-door, where stood Gander, in the dull light of the November morning. "If my bell does not ring, call me at nine o'clock," had been Sir Dene's orders the previous night. Very unusual orders indeed.

For Sir Dene, unless actually ill, liked to be up early as of yore. The once hale old man was breaking fast, far more than age was telling upon him. Generally speaking, his bell rang long before eight o'clock.

He had felt out of sorts the previous day. "Not ill, but out of sorts," he answered when questioned. News had come in of a sad stage-coach accident on the awkward old bridge at Powick, and it had recalled to Sir Dene all the past accidents of Dene Hollow. Not that the matter needed recalling: more or less, it was ever present with him.

The knock was repeated, rather louder than before.

"Come in. Can't you hear me?"

By which irritable answer Gander found his master must have spoken before, and the feeble voice had failed to reach him. In went the old serving-man—for Gander himself was growing old now—in the striped jacket he always wore, winter and summer in the morning. Sir Dene raised his head from the pillow.

"Where's my hot water?" For Gander had come in empty-handed.

"I've not brought it, Sir Dene. I thought perhaps you'd take some breakfast before stirring this morning."

Sir Dene was feeling weak and feverish, almost as though he *should* like breakfast before getting up: but he had an unconquerable aversion to giving way.

"I don't know, Gander. I like to be up and doing as long as I can."

"It's a sharp morning, Sir Dene. Wind nor'-east, enough to cut one in two. Air bleak, and a cloudy sky."

"We don't have the fine weather we used to have," remarked Sir Dene—as many another old man is apt to say and think. "Few bright days now, Gander. What's become of all the clear weather and sparkling frost?"

"It has been a dull autumn, and seems setting in for a dull winter," returned Gander. "I'll bring you up a cup of tea, Sir Dene. It'll do ye good."

Quitting the chamber before Sir Dene could object, he reappeared with a small tray, containing some tea, hot buttered toast, and an egg. Sir Dene sat up, took some tea, and then lay down again.

"You'll try a bit of the toast, Sir Dene?"

A slight wave of the hand answered him. Gander, who must have been ill indeed to refuse his own breakfast, pressed it with concern.

"No appetite, Gander. I think my time's coming at last."

Gander understood the allusion, and felt a little uncomfortable. As he stood looking down at Sir Dene, he saw that the once fresh and healthy face had an unusual pallor upon it this morning.

"You'll be better after breakfast, Sir Dene. This grey east-wind is upsetting everybody. I wish you'd try the toast, sir."

"Squire Arde paid me a visit in the night, Gander. I think we shall soon be together again."

Gander could not make out what Sir Dene was rambling about. He had drawn up the blinds and now glanced at the grey skies, as if that would help him.

"The old Squire, you know, Gander. He looked just as he used to look; had on his pepper-and-salt suit, and the little old drab overcoat. We were having a comfortable chat together, he and I. It was like old times."

"It must have been a dream, Sir Dene."

"Well, I suppose it was; but it seemed very real. We were as happy as kingfishers, chatting together. It seemed good to be with him."

"Your toast will be cold, Sir Dene," said Gander, growing more and more uncomfortable.

"Won't be long, I take it, Gander, before I go to him. It's getting almost time. God knows best; but I don't think it will be long."

After finishing the cup of tea, and taking a little of the toast, perhaps unconsciously, Sir Dene seemed better after it, and said he would take some more tea.

"It was that wretched coach overturning on Powick Bridge, upset him," soliloquized Gander, as he went out to replenish the cup. "But there are times now when he's not a bit like himself. Fancy his saying he'd had a visit from the old Squire!"

The postman's ring echoed through the hall as Gander crossed it; and the locked bag was taken up as usual to Lady Lydia. In going back with the tea, Gander halted at my lady's door to inquire if there were any letters for his master.

Two. Sir Dene looked at the handwriting as he sipped his tea. They were from two of his grandchildren; Dene the heir, and Otto the barrister. Laying them on the counterpane unopened, he took up another bit of toast, the faithful servant standing by.

"Ay. They think it right to show the old grandfather that they don't forget him, these young blades! But there's one across the sea never writes, Gander."

Gander knew to whom this alluded. Sir Dene was in the habit of talking to him of matters that he never mentioned to other people.

"Well, Sir Dene—I've said it before, and I say it again—my opinion is, that Mr. Tom has wrote, and his letter must have miscarried."

"Nonsense!" peevishly cried Sir Dene. "Letters don't miscarry like that."

"It isn't like Mr. Tom to bear malice; and I know he *don't* bear it. I'd write him a word, Sir Dene, and tell him to come home. Likely he don't dare to move without a word from you."

It was just what had been hovering in Sir Dene's mind for some weeks past. Perhaps it wanted only a word to put it into practice. "I think I will," he said. "He has been banished long enough for punishment. I'll do it as soon as I'm up, Gander."

And having an object to accomplish, Sir Dene got up at once. When dressed, he sat down by the blazing fire in the next room, and wrote Tom a letter of recall, short, kind, and peremptory. His hands shook, but the words were legible. Folding it up, he sealed it with a big red seal and stamped it with the Clanwaring arms, Gander holding the lighted taper. Then he began to address it.

"Tom Clanwaring Esquire." Thus far had Sir Dene proceeded, when he looked up.

"What's the direction, Gander?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Gander. "I heard it once—a place with a crackjaw name."

Sir Dene laid down the pen in consternation. Was Tom in some unknown region of Ireland where he could neither be written to nor got at? Reassurance came to him.

"My lady must know, Gander; it's where some of her people lived. Go and ask her for it."

Away went Gander. Never a suspicion of treachery on my lady's part, in regard to Tom, had occurred to this simple

man and his simple master ; simple in all confiding honour. My lady and her eldest son were cosily sitting together at a well-spread breakfast-table, by a blazing fire. My lady in a brown "saque," the pattern of which might have been taken from a pillow-case ; Jarvis in a flowery dressing-gown. Their conversation was brought to a standstill as the servant went in.

"My lady, will you be so good as to give me Mr. Tom's direction?"

For answer, my lady, a little taken back, stared at Gander up and down.

"Sir Dene has sent me for it," added the man.

"What does Sir Dene want with it?" she questioned.

"I believe it's to address a letter to him," said Gander, never too obliging to my lady. "Sir Dene is waiting for it now, please."

Quite equal to the occasion was Lady Lydia, without the help of that glance from her son. "I must search my desk for it, Gander. My best regards to Sir Dene, and I'll send it almost immediately."

"The scapegrace is being recalled," remarked Jarvis, when they were alone.

"I dare say. He is not coming, though."

"It would hardly be policy. You must fail to find the address."

"I'll give one that won't reach him," whispered Lady Lydia.

She soon appeared in Sir Dene's room, and found him restlessly waiting—for he still retained a great deal of his old impatience. On a sheet of paper in her hand was written a long address that Gander might have decidedly pronounced "crackjaw."

"Dear Sir Dene! how are you to-day? You want Tom's address? Here it is."

Sir Dene read it over, and slowly copied it.

"Take care of this and post it when you are at Worcester to-day, Gander," said he, handing the letter to the man.

"It can go in the bag, Sir Dene," interposed my lady. "I shall have letters myself to send off to-day."

"Gander's going to Worcester and will post it," persisted

Sir Dene, really from no other motive than a spice of obstinacy. And Lady Lydia turned green as she thought how very near the letter would have been to reaching Tom, but for her precaution in regard to the address.

"Have you been writing to Tom at last, Sir Dene?"

"I've been writing to him to return home, Lydia; he has been banished long enough. If it offends you I can't help it. I don't think—I don't think I shall be very much longer amongst you all, and I should like him here. He was poor Geoff's legacy to me, you know."

"Oh, Sir Dene, don't say that. You will be amongst us for years yet, I hope."

"I think not. I've been with old Squire Arde three parts of the night; a token, I take it, that I shall soon be with him in reality."

Lady Lydia stared a little, and glanced at Gander.

"I haven't much to keep me here now," went on Sir Dene. "But I should like to live to see Tom at home again."

"You have your letters from Dene and Otto," observed Lady Lydia, by way of passing over the last remark. "What do they say?"

"They don't say much. Dene and Charley are coming for the wedding. Otto—— Well—I—have not read Otto's have I, Gander?"

"I didn't see you read it, Sir Dene," replied Gander, who was busying himself about the room. "The letter's at your elbow, sir."

"It's not often Otto writes," remarked Sir Dene, breaking the seal of the barrister's letter. "His time's too well taken up; if Jarvis had only half his patience, it would be better for him, Lydia. Otto will make a name in the world, once he works himself into notice—go on to be a judge, I shouldn't wonder."

"He was plodding, even as a boy," rather scornfully rejoined Lady Lydia who had no superfluous love for her son Otto.

"Now, look here!" cried Sir Dene, as he read his letter. "Here's Tom been writing from Ireland to Otto asking how I am, and saying he cannot get to hear a word about Becchurst



Dene from any one. That was two months ago, Otto says. So Tom doesn't quite forget the old man!"

Lady Lydia, taking in the sense of the words as well as her anger allowed, felt that she should like to annihilate that blundering fool Otto.

"But why the deuce doesn't Tom write direct, and ask?" burst forth Sir Dene. "It's his temper keeps him from it; that's what it is. He must have a touch of the Clanwaring obstinacy, after all; though poor Geoffry hadn't. Any way, he'll soon have my letter now. Don't forget to post it, Gander."

"No danger, Sir Dene. I'll be too glad to see Master Tom back myself, to forget it," added bold Gander for the benefit of my lady. "The house has never been the same without him."

"And see that his room is got ready, and all that, mind, Gander."

"It's always ready and waiting for him, Sir Dene."

"What else does Otto say, Sir Dene?" inquired Lady Lydia, with an impassive face.

"What else? Well, he says he shall hope to be down at the wedding. There: you may take his letter and read it, if you like."

The wedding, thus mentioned by Sir Dene's grandsons was that of Captain Clanwaring. For May Arde, yielding to persecution—as she regarded it—and fate, had at length been won over to mention a possible date. When told by her father and mother that it must take place before the year was out, and bade to say *when*, she answered in her desperation, "Then let it be after Christmas."

Her conscience smote her as she said it; smote her of sin. For, down deep in her heart lingered vividly as ever the image of the scapegrace Tom: and in spite of her secret prayers, her tears and strivings, she could not banish it. Since that summer evening's visit to the Trailing Indian, not a doubt had rested on her mind of Tom Clanwaring's disloyalty and utter worthlessness; and yet—love him less she could not. "I may be able to forget him, once I am married," she said to herself, over and over again: "And I may as well marry Jarvis as any one else."

And shortly after making the concession, May absolutely began to look forward to the marriage with something like satisfaction. Not at the marriage itself, poor girl; but as a release from uncertainty. The unrest of her life was so great as to be absolute torment. Thus matters were arranged to the satisfaction of every one: and on May's part there was no thought of drawing back. Sir Dene liked the proposed union. He privately deemed May a great deal too good for Jarvis, but that was the Ardes' business, not his. Lady Lydia was in the seventh heaven of delight; and the Squire's wife wrote sundry letters, apprising intimate friends of the completion of the marriage contract between Captain Jarvis Clanwaring and her beloved daughter, Millicent Mary Arde. The reader will therefore readily understand how objectionable would be the return of Tom Clanwaring to arrest the stream of events coursing along so smoothly.

"Once get the wedding over, and he shall come, if it must be," said Lady Lydia to Jarvis; "but that must take place first."

Jarvis resented the intimation. It was as much as to insinuate that May cared for Tom still, more than she did for him: and his temper bristled up. The captain was a very attentive lover; never a day passed without his being once or twice at the Hall. But any attempt to enter on the endearments lovers suppose they have a right to offer was so promptly discouraged by May: in fact, he saw they would be so evidently distasteful: that the gallant captain prudently confined his display of affection to warm handshakes. Now and then he ran up to town for three or four days; and May would again feel free as a bird of the air.

In the afternoon of the cold and bleak November day, mentioned above, May, well muffled up, returned to the Hall in her father's open carriage, having accompanied him to Worcester. Whether it was her habitual state of low spirits and the depression they caused, that rendered her chilly, certain it was that she now always felt more or less cold. Her errand to Worcester had been to the dressmakers; to try on certain dresses that were being prepared for the wedding. Mrs. Arde, suffering from some temporary indisposition, had remained at home.

"You look cold, May," said the Squire, as he handed her down.

"Do I, papa? It is cold. I think I will take a short walk before going in."

May's short walk consisted in a listless sauntering. Buried in her sad thoughts, she was about to pass through the gate leading to the kitchen-garden, when she saw Cole, the farrier, turn out of the stables. A favourite carriage horse of the Squire's was ill at the time. May waited until the man came up.

"Is old Jack better?" she asked.

"Not much, Miss May, but I hope to have him well soon."

"What a cold day it is!" cried May; and shivered a little as she spoke.

"Aye, miss," returned the man. "It strikes me we shall have a hard winter."

"I hope not for the sake of the poor people," was May's answer. Her sweet brown eyes, a whole flood of sadness in their depths, went straight out to his. Cole and Miss May had always been on quite familiar terms, so to say: the result of his sister being the young lady's attendant. When Miss May was a small damsel, Harry Cole, the good-natured, laughing stripling, would toss the little lady "up to the moon." They were great friends still.

"I hear Mr. Tom's sent for home, Miss May."

A rush of crimson dyed May's face. Harry Cole, who had more innate delicacy than many gentlemen, had stooped to pick up a stone, and missed the sight.

"Indeed," said May, constraining her voice to indifference.

"While I was at the Dene just now, Gander came in from Worcester. He told me he had been posting a letter for Mr. Tom, that Sir Dene has written to call him home again. It's too bad to have kept him over there so long, Miss May."

"They say it has been to punish him," returned May, playing with the latch of the gate.

"I know they say it. Any way, Miss May, that does for an excuse. Punishment for what, I wonder?"

"All kinds of things were laid to his charge."

"So they were, Miss May; but they didn't go down with those that knew him."

May felt as if her life's blood were coursing about anyhow. As Susan said, Cole had never been able to see a fault in Tom Clanwaring.

"There was that money, you know. That *was* absurd."

"Oh, dear, yes," answered Cole, with a laugh. "And lots more beside that. Some things are believed in to this day as if they were gospel. Mr. Tom's one person, and I am another, Miss May: but I know this—that if it had been me, I should have come back and faced my enemies long ago. Any way, I hope he'll soon be here now."

"Susan has toothache," said May, by way of turning the subject.

"Serve her right: why doesn't she have the tooth out?" said Cole, without much sympathy for Susan: who, in right of her superior years, had domineered over him from childhood upwards in the most unscrupulous manner. "I've told her, Miss May——"

"Is that you, Cole? Come here."

Cole turned to see the Squire. Touching his hat to the Squire's daughter, he hastened away.

"Sent for at last!" mused May. "But I don't think he will dare to come. Oh, dear! what an unhappy thing life is!"

She went in at once, too miserable to remain out. Utterly wretched was she, half reckless; and felt that she would give all the chance of future happiness in this life to escape from marriage with Jarvis Clanwaring. Not that there was the smallest thought that she might do so. Fate was fate, and she could not turn aside from it. Susan Cole came forward to meet her in the hall.

"Captain Clanwaring is waiting for you in the little parlour, Miss May."

## CHAPTER XIII.

## DISCLOSURES.

"It is very odd, Gander."

"Never an answer of any sort, Mr. Otto ; neither coming nor writing. No more notice taken than if the letter had never reached him."

"I cannot understand it."

At the supper-table in the dining-room, taking some refreshment, sat Otto Clanwaring talking to the old serving-man who stood near to him. Gander's eager face was bent forward under the wax-lights.

It was the Wednesday before Christmas, and Otto Clanwaring had just arrived at the Dene for two purposes ; killing two birds with one stone. The one to spend, as usual, the Christmas-tide ; the other to assist in celebrating the marriage of Captain Clanwaring.

The wedding was arranged for Tuesday, the twenty-seventh of December. Miss Arde had held to her original determination not to be married before Christmas. Captain Clanwaring pleaded in vain for an earlier period ; and was at length fain to show himself grateful for the remote one ultimately fixed. So the preparations were put in hand, and the invitations sent out.

Christmas Day fell this year on a Sunday, and this was the week preceding it. On Monday, the nineteenth, Squire Arde went to London on business connected with his daughter's settlements, and also to procure the marriage licence. He intended to return by the Thursday night's mail and be at home on Friday morning, the day before Christmas Eve. The Hall was in the full bustle of preparing for the festivities attendant on the wedding. Beechhurst Dene had made ready, too, in anticipation of its expected guests.

Mrs. Letsom and her children had accompanied Otto from London. It had not been Otto's intention to quit work until the Friday, but his sister appealed to him to accompany her, and would not defer her departure. Colonel Letsom was in

India with his regiment. They took the day coach to Worcester, and thence drove over to the Dene ; reaching it as the clocks were striking ten, in a sharp fall of snow.

Sir Dene, weak in health, subdued in spirit, but dressed with extreme care, as usual wearing his blue coat, his fine white hair powdered, sat in the large drawing-room to receive them. Lady Lydia was with him, and also a shrunken little lady in grey silk, with hair as white as Sir Dene's, and wearing a close white net cap, with satin bows. It was Miss Clewer : sister to Sir Dene's late wife. The reader had the pleasure of once seeing her—at that stormy interview that witnessed the turning out of poor Geoffry. She was considerably turned seventy ; but had come posting over in her carriage-and-four from her residence in Gloucestershire, to be present at the first marriage that was to take place amidst her grand-nephews. The nephews and Louisa Letsom called her Aunt Ann, just as their fathers had done.

During the commotion caused by the entrance of the travellers, Jarvis came in, the bridegroom-elect ; came in from his usual evening visit to the Hall. In spite of his elaborate toilet, Otto thought he looked strangely haggard : almost as much so as Sir Dene : and Sir Dene's looks had struck the barrister painfully.

"How dreadfully he is changed, mother," whispered Otto, under cover of the bustle.

"Changed !" repeated Lady Lydia, her eyes and thoughts on her well-beloved son, the gallant captain. "Who's changed ?"

"The poor old grandfather."

"Oh ! He ! He is nearly eighty, Otto. You cannot expect him to be blooming for ever."

"It's not exactly that. There's such an intense sadness on his face. He looks just as though he were worn out with sorrow."

"Did you ever see such a shrivelled-up mummy as old Aunt Ann !" returned my lady, behind her fan. "She has brought a cat and a parrot with her, Otto, and two maids : one for herself, the other for the animals."

"She has never had any children, you see, mother," was Otto's considerate answer. "Those who live a lonely life are apt to make pets for themselves."



Gander had supper ready laid in the dining-room. Mrs. Letsom—her head aching intolerably from the cold and the long journey, for they had left London at six in the morning—declined to take any, saying she would rather go to bed at once: so Otto went in alone: and he and Gander had a confidential chat together, after the custom of old times. They were talking of Tom Clanwaring. The summons sent to Tom by Sir Dene had brought forth no response whatever: as Gander was telling him.

"I don't believe he ever received it," exclaimed Otto.

"He must have received it," returned Gander. "I posted it myself at Worcester, Mr. Otto. As well suppose the mail didn't leave, as that the letter didn't reach him."

"If he did have the letter, and could not respond to it in person, he might have written to Sir Dene. He would have done so."

"That's what Sir Dene says. It has tried him more than anything almost that went before it, Mr. Otto. For days and days, ay, and weeks, after there was time for Mr. Tom to get here, Sir Dene was waiting and watching for him. 'Perhaps he'll arrive in the morning, Gander,' he'd say to me on going to bed at night; and in the morning the first question would be, 'Gander, has he not come yet?' It has just been heart-breaking."

Otto Clanwaring, his supper finished, leaned back in his chair. There was something in all this that greatly puzzled him.

"To be recalled was all he wanted; I am sure of it," remarked the barrister. "I cannot think why he should not have come."

Neither could Gander. Neither could Sir Dene. Neither, truth to say, could many other people. Sir Dene supposed that Tom was too conscious of his unorthodox doings in connection with the Trailing Indian to reappear on the scene yet awhile: and Sir Dene resented it accordingly.

The Chinese have a proverb: "To expect one who does not come; To lie in bed and not to sleep; To serve and not to be advanced; are three things sufficient to kill a man."

It would almost seem as if the non-arrival of his favourite

grandson were killing Sir Dene. But the yearning to see him, the deferred hope, the grievous disappointment, were now giving place to anger.

"I never thought Mr. Tom was one to resent affronts in this fashion," spoke Gander. "Poor Mr. Geoffry would never have done it."

"Nor did I think so. Tom has the most forgiving disposition in the world. Besides——"

Otto stopped. The door was opened, and Sir Dene came slowly in, leaning on his stick.

"I hope you've had what you like, Otto. There's been no one to take it with you."

"I've done famously, grandfather. No, thank you: no more. I never dare take much late at night, or I should be in for a headache the next day. Gander and I were talking about Tom, sir. It seems a very strange thing that he——"

"Don't mention him in my presence," cried Sir Dene, lifting his stick menacingly at an imaginary Tom. "If he were to attempt to enter Beechhurst Dene now, my servants should thrust him forth. Never again: never again."

"There's something wants explaining in all this," thought Otto. "However, it is no business of mine," he mentally concluded, with his usual rather selfish indifference to other people's interests.

Gander brought in some mulled claret in a silver bowl, and Sir Dene and Otto sat over the fire and enjoyed it. Little things troubled Sir Dene now: and he began mentioning the state he had been in all day, expecting his two eldest nephews, Dene and Charles. Eldest in point of precedence, youngest in age. They were to have arrived at the Dene that morning from Scotland: and had not done so.

"Surely they've never been so foolish as to come round by sea—which Dene's fond of doing in summer," said Sir Dene, rather irritably. "They might be kept out a couple of weeks, if they've done that."

"They'd undoubtedly come by land, sir, at this season of the year," returned Otto. "Is their mother coming with them?"

"She can't come," said Sir Dene. "I'm sorry for it; for

she's a great favourite of mine, and I've not seen her these two years. Many things are going cross and contrary just now, Otto."

"But why can she not come, sir?"

"Because she's ill; intermittent fever, or something of that sort. Do you think the boys can arrive to-night, Otto?" he added after a pause.

"Of course it is possible," replied Otto, after some consideration; and felt sure now that the old man was sitting up for them. "They would come by coach, no doubt, as far as they could, and post the rest of the way. I don't think they'd come so late as this, grandfather. We shall see them in the morning."

"Ay, I suppose one must give them up for to-night," conceded Sir Dene. "And how is the world using you, Otto? Are you getting on?"

"Yes, I am getting on, grandfather," returned Otto, proud in his independence of being able to say so. "My name is becoming known, and business drops in. No fear now but I shall make my way; and make it well."

"Ay, I always said you would, though you have been kept back by struggles and expenses," observed Sir Dene. "You have been steady and hard-working from the first, Otto; and those who are so are sure to get on. It is my conviction of this that has induced me to help you so readily in your embarrassments."

Otto looked at Sir Dene. He did not quite understand.

"I have had no embarrassments, sir," he said.

"Well, expenses then; I suppose I ought not to say embarrassments. Whatever they were, I only felt they were legitimate. And I let you have the money with a very different feeling from any I ever gave to your spendthrift brother; I can tell you that."

Less and less did Otto understand. "I have not had any money from you since you first started me in life, grandfather. There are moments," he added, with a slight laugh, "when I feel proud of that fact. At least I am thankful for it."

"What do you call your first starting in life?" cried Sir Dene, looking hard at his grandson.

"After I had kept my terms and was called to the bar, you

generously put a cheque for five hundred pounds into my hand, sir. To start me in my profession, as you called it."

"Well?"

"Well, it did start me. I set up my chambers with it, though that didn't cost much; for all the furniture in them is not worth twenty pounds. And the rest I husbanded, and lived on as economically as I could until work came in. I have never had reason to ask you for more, sir; and I never have asked for it."

"Don't quibble, lad. If you've not asked yourself for it, you have had it."

"Had what, sir?"

"Had what—why, money. And I say, Otto, that I have given it you with more satisfaction than any ever given to Jarvey."

"But, grandfather, I have not had any from you at all. Not one farthing beyond that first five hundred pounds."

Sir Dene and his grandson stared at each other. Otto thought the poor old man's mind was rambling.

"Five or six times at the very least, Otto—more, I think; my books will tell—have I helped you to money within the last two or three years. Sometimes large sums. Why should you deny it?"

"It must be all a mistake, sir. I have had none from you."

Sir Dene leaned back in his chair, his lips compressed. Were *all* his grandchildren turning false? He had believed Otto to be so strictly truthful.

"How dare you say this to my face, sir?"

"It is the truth, grandfather. What else can I say?" And so earnestly did Otto speak, that Sir Dene almost began to wonder whether he himself was dreaming.

"Only a month or two ago—some time in October—I sent you up a cheque for a hundred pounds. Sent it up in a letter directed to your chambers. What do you say to that?"

"I received it, sir, quite safely, and acknowledged it to my brother, as he desired I should," quietly answered Otto. "I paid it away the same day, in conformity with his instructions."

For some moments Sir Dene did not speak. A light seemed breaking in upon him.

"Paid it away for yourself, or for Jarvis?"

"Oh, for Jarvis."

"I see. Just tell me what you know about it."

"I don't know much, grandfather. Two letters were delivered to me that morning. The one contained a few unimportant words from yourself, hoping I was well, and a cheque for a hundred pounds. The other was from Jarvis, saying I should receive such a cheque, and was to pay it away to a certain lawyer who would call on me in the course of the day. The lawyer called, and I gave him the cheque."

"One more question, Otto; and yet I hardly need ask it. Is what you say true—that you have never had any money from me since that first five hundred pounds?"

"It is perfectly true. Not one penny. Neither have I asked you for any, sir."

"No; but others have, in your name."

"Jarvis, I suppose."

"Once or twice. Your mother, chiefly," continued Sir Dene, bending his fine old face forward, his voice falling to a troubled whisper. "She'd sell her soul for that worthless first-born son of hers. I believe that she would sell her soul."

There was an ominous silence. Sir Dene sat, half beaten under the discovery; his head bent in thought, recalling the false pleas pressed upon him from time to time—Otto's non-success in his profession, his heavy expenses, and urgent need of money to keep his head above water. Never had the conduct of Captain Clanwaring appeared so flagrant as now. A groan broke from the old man.

"Otto, I hardly know whether I ought to let this wedding take place. Whether in honour I should not tell the Squire what a false man he is; a spendthrift and a coward."

"There's no doubt, sir, that Jarvis ran recklessly and foolishly into debt whilst he was in the army, and that he has been driven to his wits' end for money to stave off the embarrassments it entailed upon him; but marriage may prove the turning-point in his life. I should say it would."

And Sir Dene groaned again in bitterness of spirit, as he rose to go up to his room for the night, leaning on the arm of Otto.

The morning brought disappointment, in the shape of a letter from Dene, the heir. He wrote to say that a change for the worse had taken place in his mother. She was becoming so dangerously ill that neither he nor his brother could think of leaving her, even to attend the wedding. The letter concluded with a half-jesting wish that Jarvis might find a better groomsmen. For young Dene (considered as first and foremost in the Clanwaring family, after its head) had been solicited by Jarvis to undertake that office. Jarvis, with rather an ill grace, observed to the barrister that he supposed the honour must fall to his lot now; and said it as if he grudged it him.

"It's no great honour—as I look upon it," was the significant retort of Otto Clanwaring.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### AN ARRIVAL.

THE snow-flakes were falling heavily, adorning Mr. Sam Pound, swinging on the gate of the Trailing Indian. Black, his master, had gone down to Hurst Leet on some urgent private business; no doubt connected with certain poaching friends of his who lived there. Such, at least, was the conclusion drawn by Sam Pound, who was a tolerably shrewd youth. Finding it rather lonely indoors as twilight fell, for not a soul was in the dreary inn but himself, Mr. Sam had stepped out to have a look at the lane, by way of a slight change.

"Mother Goose be plucking her geese," quoth he, raising his eyes to the floating snow-flakes filling the air. "Us han't had a reg'lar snowy Christmas this ever-so-long. Bids fair for't now."

This was Friday. On and off since Wednesday the snow had been falling; so that the roads were already fairly well blocked with it. Regarding a fall of snow chiefly as a medium for snowballing unwary travellers, Mr. Pound was extremely satisfied with the prospect before him.



"We shall have the morris-dancers here," cried he, in ecstasy. For he was very fond of the morris-dancers, and thought them, next to snowballing his friends and enemies, the best things brought by a hard winter.

Swinging to and fro on the gate was rather slow work, after all. He picked up a handful of snow, and sent it bang against the opposite hedge of holly. A sure marksman he, when a snowball was the weapon.

"Hallo !"

This exclamation was the result of surprise. Just as Mr. Pound was manipulating a second ball to fling after the first, a huge mountain of snow—it really looked like it—loomed slowly into view on the high-road crossing the end of the lane. Peering at this extraordinary phenomenon Mr. Pound at length made it out to be the "waggon."

"Well, I never !" cried he. "That there waggin haven't hurried herself. Why—it be a stopping !"

In those days the waggon was an institution in England ; and was used for the conveyance of parcels and passengers from one town to another. This particular waggon was in the habit of passing along the road weekly, generally at dawn on a Friday morning—for waggons travelled night and day. They could not afford to halt by night on the road, and blundered on, crawling and creeping, and dragging their slow length along. A distance a stage-coach might take twelve or fifteen hours to accomplish, the waggon would get through in a week. That this one had been a tolerably long time on its journey was proved by the mound of snow collected above it.

Now the stopping of the waggon was less surprising to Mr. Pound than the sight of the waggon itself ; for it sometimes brought parcels for the Trailing Indian. As Mr. Pound began to trudge towards it, to receive anything that might be there for his master, he could not resist the temptation of sending a snowball or two at the horses.

"I'll lay a twopence it has brought that there box o' baccy from Lunnon !" thought he, as he advanced. "Black's been a-growling over it this——"

Mr. Pound's words failed him in very surprise. Of all the surprises brought by the waggon, this was the greatest.

Instead of the expected box disinterring itself from the inside, there appeared, helped out by the waggoner—Miss Emma Geach.

Mr. Pound's first movement was to halt where he stood and give vent to a low whistle ; his second, to turn tail, scramble home, close the inn-door, and slip the bolt. The return of this young person displeased him excessively. Of the two, he would rather the waggon had brought a wild bear. Miss Geach was at the door almost as soon as he ; rattling at it in an authoritative manner, when she found it fastened.

"Sam Pound, open the door ! What do you mean by this ?"

So she had recognized him, in spite of the snow and the twilight ! Not seeing his way to keeping her out, Sam unbolted the door.

She came in with her old warm cloak drawn round her, worn and shabby now, and a ragged shawl tied over her bonnet. She had gone away grandly by coach, plump and blooming, her box of clothes beside her : she returned humbly in a waggon, thin and cross-looking, and with no luggage at all—unless a handful of things tied up in a cotton handkerchief could be called such. Sam Pound, backing against the rack behind the door, made his observations in silence.

"Take a mug o' beer to the waggoner, Sam Pound. And be quick over it."

Whatever Miss Geach had lost in the way of looks, she had kept her sharpness of tongue. Sam would no more have dared to disobey the imperative order than he would have attempted to fly. Drawing the beer, he went out with it, walking as slowly as he could, and sullenly kicking up the snow before him. In the first place, Sam held Miss Geach in no favour ; her scornful treatment of his brother Jim excited his resentment, and he also disliked her on his own account. In the second place, fears were crossing his mind that now she was back again, he might no longer be wanted at the Trailing Indian : and, as it was a tolerably idle service, it just suited Mr. Sam.

When he returned indoors, and took his time over the errand, Miss Geach had been upstairs to her room, put on a gown of her own that had remained all this time at the inn,

and was down in the kitchen again, making some tea. Brushed up a little from her cold journey of several days and nights, she looked very much the same as usual; a little thinner, perhaps, but quite as good-looking.

"Toast this bread, Sam Pound."

Sam Pound's mind was so stunned by her proceedings, that he complied mechanically. Two rounds of bread, cut from the quartern loaf. When toasted, Miss Geach added a liberal supply of salt butter, drew the table closer to the fire, and sat down to her tea.

"Where's Black?" she asked presently.

"He's went off to Hurst Leet."

Sam had squatted himself on the floor on the other side of the fireplace, and sat facing her, his hands clasped round his knees. The kitchen looked homely and comfortable in the firelight.

"Wonder when she had any tea last?" thought Sam, as he watched the eagerness with which she ate and drank. "Shouldn't think 'twas o' one while."

"And how's the place going on, Sam Pound?" demanded Miss Emma, pouring out another cup of tea and beginning upon a second round of toast.

"Mortal dull. Us haven't had a customer in all to-day, not for as much as a pint o' beer."

"Who was asking about the inn? I mean the place out of doors. Hurst Leet and all that."

"It be as it always is, for what I see," returned Sam, ungraciously determined to give no more information than he could help.

"Anybody dead?"

"The missis be dead."

"Didn't I tell you I wasn't asking about the house?" she returned wrathfully. "How's Harry Cole, down at the smithy?"

"He's had a bad wrist, through a horse that up and kicked him being shoed. It be well again."

"Has Mr. Tom Clanwaring come back?"

"The face her must have to ask *that!*" thought Sam, as he stared. "No, he bain't back, he bain't."

"I suppose the rest are coming to the Dene for Christmas. The heir and his brother—are they here?"

"I ha'n't seen 'em."

"Is the London lawyer here yet?"

"I dun know," shortly answered Sam. "They quality folk don't concern me: nor me them."

Miss Geach was not to be repressed.

"The captain—has *he* come yet?"

"The captain ha'n't been away, as I've heerd on," growled Sam.

"Not away!"

"No, he ha'n't. He lives at the Dene now, he do."

"I'm sure he doesn't."

"I'se sure he do. There."

Miss Geach paused in the act of raising a cup of tea to her mouth. "Who says he does, Sam Pound?"

"I says it, for one. All the parish knows he do. Bain't he about the place everlasting?"

"Are you sure?"

"Be *you* sure that's buttered toast you be eating?" was Sam's retort. "The captain has lived along o' Sir Dene and my Lady a'most a year now."

A peculiar light stole slowly over Miss Geach's face as she at length accepted the assertion. It looked very hard at that moment. Sipping the tea deliberately, she seemed lost in thought.

"And the Squire's people, how are they?" she resumed, with an air of indifference. "Is Miss May married yet?"

"Not as I've heard on," said churlish Sam, more than ever resolved to tell nothing of his own accord.

"And how are your own folks going on since I left these parts, Sam?" she continued condescendingly.

"They bain't dead yet, our folks bain't, and there bain't none of 'em married," was the response.

There was a short silence. Miss Geach, stirring the sugar in her third cup of tea, seemed lost in thought again.

"Take out the biggest lump of coal you can find, and put it on, Sam Pound," she presently remarked. "After that, you may shut the shutters and light the candles."

Mr. Sam slowly rose to obey her. He had a great mind to tell her to put on the coal herself—but it might not be policy to do so. Suppose she turned him out that night?

“Mother used to say she’d as much stock as Old Nick,” thought the young man. “She’s more than ever now. Wish the waggin had frozen her, I do!”

He was selecting the largest lump of coal, when the door was sharply opened, and a rush of air and snow and Black came in together. By the haste the latter displayed, one might have supposed he had seen another ghost.

“Well, Black, and how be you?”

In the hurry of his arrival, he had not at first noticed her presence. The salutation brought him up, and he stood motionless. Had she been a ghost herself, he could not have gazed more intently.

“It’s me, Black. You needn’t stand staring as if you didn’t know me.”

“I might well stare at seeing *you*,” retorted Black, in no pleasant tones. “You impudent hussy! How dare you come back here in this bold way?”

“Because it’s my home,” returned she, with equanimity, as she began to wash up the tea-things.

Leaving them to the battle—which Miss Emma Geach would be tolerably sure to gain; for Black, in his failing health and strength, was no match for her now—we will go on to Beechhurst Dene, where something a little curious was happening this self-same evening.

Sir Dene, dressed to receive his guests, was standing in the light of his sitting-room fire thinking that, what with one non-arrival and another, things were not going as pleasantly as they might have gone. The disappointment about the heir and his brother was still felt, and now he had just heard a report that Squire Arde had not returned from London. Gander gave him the information while helping him on with his coat. Captain Clanwaring, just come in from the Hall, said its master had not arrived. There was this snow, too!

One of the largest dinners given for many years at the Dene, was to take place this evening, in honour, of course, of the approaching wedding. Invitations had gone out to the

first people in the county, and were accepted. The entertainment was to be on a lavish scale : amidst other things, a band was engaged to play in the hall during the banquet.

On Christmas-Day, the Ardes would dine quietly at the Dene as usual. On Monday, there would be a dinner-party at the Hall. And on Tuesday, the wedding-day, the Hall of course gave a breakfast.

With all his heart, Sir Dene wished this evening over. Truth to say, his strength was not equal to entertaining guests : though, in his old-fashioned courtesy, he intended to try and do it as in his best days. But if his old friend and neighbour were to be absent, half its charm, for him, would be gone. Squire Arde was to have returned home that morning, and Sir Dene thought it very hard that he had not arrived.

"I hope the carriages will be able to travel along the roads," thought he, as he went to the window and looked out on the snowy landscape. "It is a long drive for some of them : and will take longer than usual. Hope they'll take care to set off in time !"

It was past five now, and the dinner-hour was seven. As Sir Dene stood, looking and thinking, the door was tapped at, and Captain Clanwaring put his head in.

"Mr. Arde is not back yet, sir."

"And why not ?" retorted Sir Dene, sharply ; the sharpness not meant for the absent Squire, but for Jarvis himself. Sir Dene had decided not to allude to the deceit in regard to money matters that had come to his knowledge through Otto ; at least, until the wedding should be over. But the fact lay sorely on his mind, and had rendered him barely civil since then to either the captain or Lady Lydia.

"He couldn't get his business done in time to leave London last night ; he leaves to-night, and will be home to-morrow," said Jarvis. "Mrs. Arde has just had a letter from him."

"A letter at this time of day ! What do you mean ?"

"It was delivered about three o'clock this afternoon, sir. The mail was no doubt late in Worcester ; and the roads are very heavy just now"



"There's no uncertainty about it, then—he won't be here to dinner?"

"No, sir: he can't be."

Sir Dene turned away, and Jarvis retreated from the room. By-and-by, when the old man was dozing in his easy-chair by the fire, he was awakened by a resplendent vision kneeling at his feet.

It was Mrs. Letsom, dressed in a pale pink silk, richly trimmed with lace; but she wore neither flowers nor jewels; her fair neck and arms were bare.

"Grandpapa, I have come with a petition," she coaxingly said, winding her pretty white arms about him. "If you will only grant it!"

"What is it, my dear?" he asked, bending to kiss her forehead. For he loved her very well: though not as he had loved Margaret. She kept his head down and whispered in his ear.

"Let me wear the diamonds to-night."

Up went Sir Dene's head with a look of surprise.

"The diamonds, Louisa. What diamonds?"

"Yours, grandpapa. The Clanwaring diamonds."

Sir Dene shook his head. "Those diamonds have never been out, except to be looked at, since my wife died."

"Then I'm sure it's time they were aired," returned the young lady. ;

"The diamonds are never worn, you see, except by the wife of the reigning master, Louisa," he explained, with a touch of the pride that was not yet at rest within him. "They will go to young Dene when I die; and be worn by his wife when he marries."

"But why need you be so exclusive, grandpapa? Dene's not married yet; nor likely to be."

"It is our custom, child. Your mother once attacked me on the subject of the diamonds; trying to persuade me to let her wear them. If I remember rightly we were going to the ball at the Worcester Music Meeting, with the Foleys and others. But I gave her to understand, once for all, that it could not be."

"That was different, grandpapa. This would be only in

our own house, just for to-night. If you would let me wear only the necklace!"

"I don't like to break through the rule, Louisa. Dene might not like it, either."

"Dene's not here. Besides, he has no business to like or dislike anything of the sort, as long as you are with us. I think Dene would be the first to say I should wear them."

Sir Dene remained silent, as though considering. Mrs. Letsom rose, and began turning herself round in the light of the fire, her hands held out.

"My dress looks well, doesn't it, grandpapa? It's new on to-night."

"Very well, my dear."

"But don't you see that I have neither bracelets nor necklace? I'll tell you why. Whilst I was dressing just now, my maid discovered that my jewel-box had not been brought. Not that there was much in it, excepting the pearls. I have nothing to wear to-night, grandpapa."

"Your mother has jewels. Borrow some from her."

"I wouldn't wear anything she possesses—wretched old trumpery! Oh, grandpapa, do yield! Just the necklace only. You would enjoy the pleasure of seeing it worn once again."

And Sir Dene yielded. With the face kissing his, and the white arms entwined about him, he could only yield. But only the necklace, he said, so far resolute. Only the necklace.

"Ring for Gander, Louisa."

The diamond case was kept at the bottom of a chest in the next room, Sir Dene's chamber. Getting his keys, Sir Dene unlocked the chest himself; and Gander dived down to get it out. He had to remove sundry things; Sir Dene's military orders (he wore one in his coat to-night); parchments belonging to the estate, and so forth. Mrs. Letsom, eager and excited, stood by and held the light.

But the case of diamonds was not there. *It was not there.* Sir Dene sank speechless into a chair. Gander for once raised an alarm which brought forth the people who were attiring themselves in their dressing-rooms. Lady Lydia, Aunt Ann, Captain Clanwaring, and his brother Otto. The captain demanded whether the house had gone mad,

"No," said Gander, "it's the diamonds that are gone. We've had thieves here."

"The Clanwaring diamonds," cried Louisa. "And I was to have worn them to-night."

Otto stood, half-paralyzed. He looked at his mother, he looked at his brother ; but they both suddenly went into their rooms again, and shut the doors. Going up to Louisa, he caught her hand.

"Say no more now, Louisa," he whispered in some agitation. "Hush it up. Hush it up, by any means in your power, if you value this house's peace and good name."

"Hush it up !" retorted Louisa Letsom, in loud tones of anger. "Hush up the theft of the diamonds ! You cannot know what you are saying, Otto."

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE SNOW-STORM.

A DARK night, that of Friday, the twenty-third of December, and the London and Worcester mail was toiling its slow way along towards the latter city under difficulties. Snow was falling heavily : snow had been falling, more or less, for some days. The coach was unusually laden. Although it was the Royal Mail, and carried his Majesty's letters, it was not on that account exempt from carrying parcels, especially during the busy Christmas season ; and it was crammed with presents from people in London to their friends in the country. Baskets of codfish, barrels of oysters, hampers of wine, and passengers' luggage. Never had the Worcester mail been more weightily charged.

Four passengers sat inside, none out. People had not cared to risk the cold journey for so many hours outside when they could obtain an inside place. Of the passengers, one was a lady, the other three were gentlemen : and they leaned back in their corners, well wrapped up, wishing the night was over, and

mentally grumbling at the pace to which the state of the roads condemned them.

More and more slowly went the horses. After leaving London, the mail had made way pretty well and kept its time tolerably at the different halting-places for the change of horses. It was only within an hour or so that the roads had become almost impassable. The poor horses toiled and struggled: never a handsomer team than those four brown steeds; but they could not get on. The coachman alternately coaxed and whipped them. The guard constantly rose in his seat behind, but could not see into the mist. Then he would put his horn to his mouth, and blow a blast, but to what end? It only went echoing away out into the lone country, until it was lost in the snow.

The horses came to a standstill, and the coachman turned to speak, through his mufflers. "Light your lantern, Jim, and see whether I be in the road or off it."

The guard got down with his lighted lantern, and at once sank up to the knees in snow. "This can't be the highway," he muttered to himself. "If it is, the storm must have fallen here kindly."

It was impossible to tell whether they were in the road or not. Snow lay everywhere. So far as could be seen, the look-out presented nothing but one white plain: and those small white hillocks, lying here and there, might be drifts or covered hedges: no human being could tell. The horses, panting after the exertions they had made, tossed their heads to the reins and tried to shake themselves free, but the leaders would not go forward of their own will, and to urge them unduly might bring death to them.

"It's of no use, Smith," spoke the guard to the coachman at length, from the depths of his comforters. "We can't go on."

"What are we to do, then?"

"That's more than I know!"

Meanwhile the passengers were gradually awakening from their drowsy state to the fact that they had come to a standstill, the mail was not progressing at all. Two of the gentlemen wore white cotton night-caps; the third had a purple silk handkerchief tied over his head; the lady was enveloped in a

quilted bonnet. In those days of long night stages, it was the custom to prepare for sleep inside the coaches with as much regard to comfort as circumstances permitted. One of the windows was let down, and the purple handkerchief thrust itself out to ascertain the cause of the delay.

"What's the matter?"

The guard with his lantern trod his way to the window, as quickly as the snow allowed him.

"We can't get on, sir."

"Not get on!" came the half-angry, half-authoritative rejoinder, in tones familiar to the reader. For the traveller with the purple handkerchief was Squire Arde.

"No, sir," repeated the guard, "we can't get on at all. The snow has been uncommonly heavy here, and the horses are not able to make their way in it. It's coming down now as thick as ever I saw it: getting worse every minute."

The startling news fully aroused the passengers. As many of the four heads as could appear at the two windows, did so, their faces presenting various phases of consternation.

"We must get on, guard," spoke Squire Arde, with the authority of one accustomed to command.

"I can't see how it is to be done, sir," civilly replied the man. "The leaders refuse to move of their own accord, and Smith dare not force 'em on. We don't even know that we be in the road."

"But we must get on," pursued Squire Arde. "To-morrow will be Christmas-Eve; and I—I—I have engagements at home that I cannot break or put off."

"To-day is Christmas-Eve, sir," corrected the guard: "morning has been in some time. But we cannot get on any the more for that."

"Where are we?" was heard from a passenger who was unable to get his head out.

"Not such a great way off Chipping Norton, sir," was the lucid answer. "Half-way, maybe. But it's all guesswork."

"Is there any danger, guard?" called out the lady, in a quick, pleasant voice.

"Not as long as we keep still, ma'am."

"But surely we are not to keep still all night! Good

gracious, guard ! Why, suppose—suppose another coach comes up and runs over us ? ”

The gentleman with the largest cotton night-cap was striking his repeater. By the hour he knew they could not have been very seriously delayed.

“ Oh, come,” said he, “ it’s not so bad. I dare say we can get on with a little perseverance. The snow must have drifted just here.”

“ What is to be done, Smith ? ” roared Squire Arde to the coachman. “ What is to be done ? ”

“ Nothing so far as I see,” was the coachman’s reply, given with equanimity. “ If I tried to force the animals on, it might result in an upset down a bank, and cost all of ’em their lives, men and cattle too.”

Even Squire Arde’s impatience would not risk that result : but he urged a cautious attempt, as did his fellow-travellers. They thought it possible that the snow-drift was confined to this one spot, and might be got through.

An effort was made. The guard and the passenger who owned the repeater went to the heads of the leaders, and with great caution some few yards of the way were surmounted. But the snow grew deeper, or rather, they fell more deeply into it. The coachman’s decided opinion was, that they had lost the road ; and that even this cautious moving was extremely perilous. So they desisted : life is sweet, and none of us are willing to risk it lightly. There appeared nothing for it but to remain stationary.

And remain so they did, until morning. None of the passengers ever forgot that night. The fame of it went abroad ; and it is talked of to this day in the counties of Worcestershire, Oxfordshire, and Gloucestershire.

When day dawned it was found that the coachman’s conjecture was correct. They were off the road : and how they had penetrated without accident to the spot where they found themselves was a marvel. Inside a ploughed field stood the coach, its previously broken fence having removed the barrier between him and the highway. *But the fence was broken only for a very short space, scarcely more than enough to allow of the horses and mail getting through.* It was this that rendered it remarkable—that they should have passed through at that one



particular spot. The snow fell incessantly, the road, even could they have returned to it, was utterly impassable; to attempt to go on to Worcester was out of the question for the present. By dint of exertion, they reached a lonely farmhouse beyond the field, and, within its hospitable walls and stables, man and beast obtained the most welcome rest and shelter that any of them had ever enjoyed in their need.

I must beg you to note the days, for there was a singular romance attached to this detention of the mail and its passengers. People interested in the fact, were wont to say that it had been stopped by the finger of Heaven. This day, Saturday, was Christmas Eve; Sunday would be Christmas Day; and Monday, the 26th, would be the eve of Miss Arde's wedding-day.

When Mr. Arde went to London on the Monday, it had been his full intention to quit it by the Thursday night's mail, in order to reach Worcester on Friday morning, and his own home in the course of the day. But when Thursday came, he found he was not able to do this; and he wrote to his wife saying he should be home on Saturday. As we heard in a previous chapter.

This delay in London rather vexed him. For one thing, it prevented his joining the dinner-party given by Sir Dene Clanwaring on Friday; and Mr. Arde was fond of good dinners. The fault was his lawyers'; they were preparing Miss Arde's marriage settlement, and did not get it ready. He blew them up sharply, and on the Friday morning the deed was handed to him. On the Friday afternoon he was at the Bull and Mouth, and put himself into the Worcester mail—which in those days started early, either at four or five in the afternoon. He carried with him the marriage settlement, and the marriage licence, a fine cod-fish, and two barrels of oysters. So the mail set off on its journey cheerfully enough; and traversed part of the distance only to find it could not traverse the remainder. Mr. Arde, when writing to his wife, had said he should be home on Saturday "without fail." But, here he was instead, snowed up in that lonely farmhouse, somewhere in the unknown regions about Chipping Norton; and, on the whole, glad of the farmhouse to shelter in.

Nevertheless, as the hours of Saturday went on, and there appeared no chance of their moving, for the snow came down heavily at intervals, Mr. Arde chafed at the delay, showing some irritation on the point to his fellow-travellers, and telling them that urgent business awaited him at his home in Worcestershire. Very true; it did so. But had the business been ten times as urgent, had it involved life or death, he could not have helped the detention.

Beds were improvised for the travellers on Saturday night. The farmer and his family were hospitable, and did their best in every way to make their unexpected guests comfortable. The mail-coach, covered with sacks to keep it dry, stood out in the snow; the horses were in the stables; the coachman and guard made themselves happy with the farmer's servants, and no doubt secretly enjoyed the holiday as an interlude in their life's occupation.

Many were the anxious looks cast upon the weather when the travellers rose on Christmas morning. One sheet of white presented itself everywhere, and there was at least no chance of their getting on that day. The farmer feasted them right royally with turkeys, and other good things incidental to the season; amidst which appeared Mr. Arde's large cod-fish, and one of his barrels of oysters; a rare treat to the farmer and his people. They drew round the fire with dessert, to make merry, telling anecdotes and stories; and for a time Squire Arde forgot his vexation. Some friends in the locality, dinner guests, who were to have partaken of the family's hospitality, could not get there by reason of the snow.

On Monday matters out of doors remained in the same state, and the prisoners had to be prisoners still. Yet worse, there seemed no indications that things would alter; and Mr. Arde was at his wits' end. He chafed and fumed, and took counsel with the coachman and guard. All to no purpose. The rest rallied him; the lady laughed at him good-humouredly. Cheerful herself under all circumstances of existence, however untoward, she merrily told him that the adventure was agreeable rather than otherwise, and would keep them in conversation for the remainder of their lives. Mr. Arde at length disclosed the reason of his impatience. His daughter, whose wedding

was fixed for the following day, could not be married without him, as he bore both licence and settlements. They admitted the plea ; agreeing with him that the detention was unfortunate ; but they were unable to speed him onwards.

"Only think if I should not be home by to-morrow morning !" cried Mr. Arde, in accents of alarm at the very thought.

"They would only have to postpone the ceremony for a day or two," cheerfully pointed out the lady.

Squire Arde shook his head. "I don't like weddings postponed," said he. "Old wives say it means ill-luck, you know, Mrs. W——. We must get away somehow to-night."

And out he went again in his restlessness, to the guard and coachman.

Monday wore on. The travellers sat by the fire, and played cards, and the good farmer feasted his guests again. Not one of them in after life forgot his genuine hospitality and kindness. For I am recording only what actually took place. For three days, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, they had been detained. So prolonged and heavy a snowfall had not been known in the country for many years.

Tuesday morning. Squire Arde was the first to gaze out anxiously. It was the wedding-day—or ought to have been—and he was nearly out of his mind with impatience. For though a very easy man in general, it was in Mr. Arde's nature to put himself unusually out when anything went wrong on great occasions ; and perhaps the consciousness of the very fact that in his heart he did not cordially like Captain Clanwaring, made him all the more impatient to get the marriage over and done with. Doubt would then be off his mind. Ever and anon in the past few weeks a voice had been whispering to him that he and his wife might have done wrong in urging Jarvis Clanwaring upon Mary ; she was young, and could have waited to make another choice. However, what was settled, was settled ; and the Squire now only wanted to be at home and get it over. But this snowstorm had come to detain him.

As a bird flutters its wings against the bars of its cage, in vain endeavour to escape, so it was with George Arde. What mattered it though the weather on this Tuesday morning was

giving evident signs of a speedy break-up? It did not serve him. Had the roads been suddenly cleared, by some miracle, that morning, he could not have reached home in time for the ceremony. Mrs. W——, good, trusting woman that she was, then, and throughout all the trouble that was destined to come to her in later life, said that these accidents sometimes happened only to answer some wise end. But Mr. Arde wholly refused to see it in this instance.

By Tuesday night the high-road had become passable for larger vehicles, and the mail, leaving London that afternoon for Worcester, absolutely passed on its way. Nothing of this was known at the farm. News certainly did come in that the highway was tolerably clear again. What of that? -it only served to exasperate Mr. Arde the more. For this miserable mail, embedded deep in the snow, could not as yet be got by any means on to the highway. And thus another night passed, and the prisoners were prisoners still. And Squire Arde decided that fate and fortune were against him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### AT BEECHHURST DENE.

OTTO CLANWARING stood over the pantry fire, talking to the old butler: a pleasant room, panelled with oak. Gander was frightfully discomposed. In all the years the man had lived with Sir Dene, he had never been so put out as now, at the disappearance of the diamonds. It was Saturday morning, and Christmas Eve, for we have to go back a little to record what had been happening during the snow-storm at Beechhurst Dene and elsewhere. The dinner-party took place on the previous Friday evening; and Sir Dene, fatigued with his exertions as host, was not yet up.

"No, Mr. Otto, you had better *not* go in to see him," Gander was saying with quite the same amount of authority he had used when the barrister was a boy. "When my master says, 'Gander, take care that I am not disturbed for

a bit,' it's my place to obey, sir ; and Sir Dene knows that I shall do it."

"I should be the last to disturb him against his will, Gander."

"Yes, I think you would be, Mr. Otto."

"The dinner was too much for him," observed Otto. "A courteous man, as my grandfather eminently is, exerts himself at all cost to entertain his guests : and a state occasion like that of last night involves a continual mental strain. Sir Dene should have given up the presidency to—to Captain Clanwaring ; and sat as a guest himself."

"He wouldn't do that," disputed Gander. "Whilst he's able to appear amongst 'em at all, it will be as chief. Quite right too. To Captain Clanwaring he never would give up," boldly added Gander : "he don't like him well enough. I can't tell but he might have given up last night after what happened, had the heir been here."

Otto said nothing to this. Whatever his own private contempt for his elder brother, he did not choose to betray it to the butler.

"What a snow-storm we are having !" he cried, turning his eyes on the white landscape, by way of changing the conversation.

"It was not the entertaining, Mr. Otto ; my master's equal to that once in a way yet ; though I think it will be the last time he ever attempts it," resumed Gander, passing over the remark about the snow. "'Twas that awful upset just as the company was arriving. It shook him frightfully, and my wonder was that he sat down to table at all. I'm sure I didn't know whether I stood on my head or my heels all the while I waited."

"Yes," said Otto, looking into the fire ; "it is not pleasant to miss one's family diamonds."

"No, it's *not* pleasant," answered Gander. "Not a wink of sleep has the poor master had for thinking of it. And he has been getting an idea into his head that makes him feel worse."

"What's that ?"

"Well, he thinks 'twas no common thief that took 'em," returned Gander, deliberately.

"What do you mean?"

"No housebreaker, or anything of that sort. 'Don't be put out about it, Gander,' said he to me; '*you* wouldn't touch the diamonds'—for you see, Mr. Otto, 'twas an awkward loss for me, and I told him so; nobody but me, besides himself, having access to the keys. He had been thinking it over in the night, Sir Dene went on to say, and had come to the decision that somebody had taken the diamonds to make money on 'em."

The barrister's usually impassive face turned fiery red. Glancing up at the pantry clock he made some remark about the hour. But the butler was not to be repressed.

"It has been nothing but worrying him for money this many a year past. Worry, worry, worry; I wonder sometimes Sir Dene stands it, and so would you wonder, Mr. Otto, if you had to go through it. My lady's at him perpetually; it's money for herself, or for the captain, or for *you*. As for the captain, he has not dared ask on his own score this long while, for Sir Dene will never hear him."

Otto Clanwaring opened his lips to say that none of the money had been for himself; but closed them again without speaking. A shrewd doubt lay upon him, gathered from Gander's glance and from Gander's tone, that the man guessed it perfectly, or that his master had enlightened him.

"And so, Mr. Otto, Sir Dene thinks, seeing lately he has not responded much to the demands, but just shut up his breeches pockets, that perhaps the diamonds have been taken to borrow money upon."

Again an idea crossed the mind of Otto Clanwaring, that Gander had his suspicions that he, Otto, knew something about this; suspicions drawn no doubt from his perhaps too evident efforts to hush up the matter on the previous night when the loss was discovered. Otherwise the man would hardly have spoken so decidedly.

"I can only say, Gander, that I have not borrowed the diamonds—as you put it."

"Not likely, Mr. Otto. But now look here, sir. If the diamonds could be returned, or if proof could be given to the master that they're not lost outright, it would comfort him."

Otto really knew not what to answer.



"I was thinking, sir, that perhaps we might have got up a bit of a plot, you and me. If you could get the diamonds, I'd carry the case to Sir Dene, and say, 'Look, Sir Dene, at my poor foolish old memory ;' and vow I had put 'em elsewhere for safety, and forgot it. Just as the widow Barber put away that deed of hers years ago, and had to turn out of her place in consequence."

"Are you suggesting this out of consideration to Sir Dene, or for others?" inquired Otto.

"Why, for Sir Dene, of course, sir," replied Gander, with an emphasis that seemed to imply he would not trouble himself to do it for others. "It would be a pack of lies : but Heaven would forgive me for the sake of the poor master. He's too old to have these tricks played him, Mr. Otto ; the loss of the diamonds is just telling upon his mind : and I don't know what the end of it will be."

There was a pause. The barrister's head was bent in thought ; Gander, perfectly still, waited for an answer.

"Tell me freely why you are saying this," said Otto, looking up suddenly, his indifferent tone changing to frankness. "You have something in your mind, Gander."

"Well, sir, as it's you, and you ask me, I think I will tell. Captain Clanwaring has got the diamonds."

An exceedingly disagreeable sensation, resembling shame, attacked Otto on hearing this. He gave the man a word of reprimand and bade him not talk so fast. It was not Otto's duty to betray his brother.

"I am just as sure of it as that we two are talking here," persisted Gander. "After the company had gone last night, Mrs. Letsom came into my pantry, and began again about the diamonds, vowing she would have every nook and corner of the house turned out, and every servant searched, them and their boxes. Suddenly in comes Captain Clanwaring, seized her hand and said—well, I hardly know what he said, Mr. Otto, and at the time he didn't see me, for I'd gone behind the screen there. Just a few words, it was ordering her to be quiet and make no fuss if she valued his welfare, but they startled me. His face was white as death. He had taken enough to drink, too. I knew then who had the diamonds ; and Mrs. Letsom, I

fancy, knew, for she turned nearly as white as he was, and never spoke another word. 'Twas my lady who cribbed 'em, Mr. Otto; it must have been. Nobody but she could get to Sir Dene's keys—except me."

Otto Clanwaring bit his lip almost to pain. How terrible this was to him, a man of honour, his sharp accents betrayed.

"Then it was you who instilled these suspicions into the mind of Sir Dene, Gander!"

"Not a bit of it, sir. I've never said a word till this moment, and shan't speak of them again. Sir Dene took up the suspicions for himself in the night, while he lay awake. Hinting at them to me this morning when I went in, I pretended that he must be mistaken."

"And you must be mistaken," spoke Otto, decisively. "Better not let Captain Clanwaring hear you."

"Let it go so," returned the man calmly. "But—if there's any means of getting back the diamonds, *get* them back, for the poor master's sake."

"Sir Dene must talk to you very confidentially, Gander?"

"So he does, sir. There's been no one else here the past twelvemonth to talk to but me, and he has got into the habit of it. We've grown old together, sir. You've all been away but the captain; and the master wouldn't talk to *him*. If Mr. Tom was here 'twould be different."

Sir Dene's bell broke up the colloquy. Gander hastened upstairs, leaving Otto standing over the fire.

It was a painfully humiliating moment for Otto Clanwaring. That the affair had taken place exactly as the old serving-man had divined—his mother abstracting the case from the chest, and handing it to Jarvis—Otto felt as sure of as though he had seen it done. With his whole heart, he hated Gander's clear-sightedness in this. Although the man had been in the family so many years as to have become almost as one of themselves, it was not pleasant that he should be cognizant of this disgraceful act.

"What a curse are spendthrift habits!" cried the barrister in his bitterness.

Quitting the pantry, he bent his steps to the library, where he expected to find his mother and brother alone. He intended

to act on Gander's suggestion, and ask them to redeem the diamonds. The time had gone by for mincing the matter.

With the snowy landscape out of doors so suggestive of cold, and the blazing fire within, the library presented a picture of comfort. Lady Lydia and Jarvis sat on a sofa, and were evidently consulting together. Jarvis lay back against one of its cushions, yawning and stretching, and not looking any the fresher for the wine taken at last night's dinner. Otto took up his stand before them; and in a low voice and in a few words said what he had to say. It brought my lady bolt upright, and she told Otto he was mad.

"I know you have pledged the diamonds, Jarvis," went on Otto. "What did you get upon them?"

"It's a lie!" said polite Jarvis.

"Look here," quietly rejoined Otto, "this sort of thing will do no good. The job is a bad job altogether, but it's *done*; and all that remains now is to see whether it can be undone. Don't trouble yourself to deny it to me, Jarvis. I have known of the transaction all along."

"What an infernal lie!" amended Jarvis.

"Pale the money-lender holds the diamonds. I saw you leave them with him at his house; I saw you receive the wages."

A burst of abuse from Jarvis. Abuse of the money-lender, who must, as he concluded, have betrayed trust; abuse of Otto. Lady Lydia, fearing the noise might penetrate beyond the room, stood between them, praying them to be tranquil.

"It could not be helped," she said to Otto, finding how useless it would be to keep up the denial. "Jarvis was *obliged* to have money, and there were no other means of raising it. The diamonds were lying useless, not looked at from year's end to year's end; and I assumed to a certainty that they would be replaced before Sir Dene could find it out. There's no great harm done," she concluded in slighting tones.

"As he has found it out, they must be restored," was Otto's answer. "For Sir Dene's sake. Do you hear, Jarvis?"

"They can be restored, and will be restored, as soon as

the wedding is over, without any of your confounded interference," spoke Jarvis sullenly. "But for this delay, they would have been replaced before."

"Some days to wait yet!" remarked Otto. "Were the roads clear, I would go up to London and get them, if you could find the money."

Jarvis laughed in derision. He find the money! When Mary Arde's ten thousand pounds should pass into his possession, he would have more than enough for everything. Until then he had not a stiver in the world.

"What did you get from Pale on them?" asked Otto.

"Only a trifle. Three hundred pounds."

Three hundred pounds! In truth it was a sum far beyond any that could be found. Otto imparted a hint that Sir Dene suspected something, but held his tongue about Gander. A great pity crossed his heart when he thought of Mary Arde. Bound to this spendthrift, what would her future be? But that Jarvis was his brother, Otto had certainly opened the eyes of the ruling powers at the Hall.

"It is nothing less than a fraud," exclaimed Otto.

"What is?" snapped his mother.

"Marrying Mary Arde."

My lady's eyes blazed forth their denunciation of Otto and his gratuitous opinion; and he was fain to hold his peace.

She went into Sir Dene's room as soon as she could obtain admittance, which was not until Sir Dene had dressed for the day, and was sitting near his fire. There she endeavoured, in her plausible way, to disperse any doubt that might lie on Sir Dene's mind of Jarvis in connection with the diamonds. He heard her in silence, saying nothing, and whether she made any impression upon him, or whether he really entertained any doubt of Jarvis, she could not tell. Of course she was unable to speak out on the matter, or to defend Jarvis openly; it had all to be done by implication. That Sir Dene was looking unusually worn and ill that day, was easily seen.

"I quite think with dear Jarvis, that no common thief has taken them," remarked Lady Lydia; for she continued to pursue the subject long after Sir Dene's silence might

have warned her it had been wiser to drop it. "As you said last night, Sir Dene, whoever took the diamonds must have known they were kept in the chest——"

"And known where my keys are kept too, my lady, when I have not got them about me."

It was the first time he had spoken, and the interruption was a sharp one. My lady coughed.

"Ah yes, no doubt," she blandly said. "Those diamonds, I fancy, had not been looked at for a year. Perhaps not for considerably more than that."

No answer.

"There is only one possible solution to the mystery that occurs to me; and that may not be the true one. But you know, dear Sir Dene, we cannot help our thoughts."

Still no answer. Sir Dene was bending forward, his hands resting on his stick, his eyes bent on the carpet. Lady Lydia brought her face a little nearer to his, and her low voice became confidential.

"Did that worthless fellow, Tom Clanwaring, help himself to them before he went away? It is the question I am asking myself, Sir Dene. He knew where the keys——"

Not quite at the first moment had Sir Dene caught her meaning. It flashed across him now, and he started up in fiery passion, grasping his stick menacingly. Perhaps the fact of his *knowing* Tom could have had nothing to do with the loss, rendered his anger the greater. For it happened that both Sir Dene and Gander knew the diamonds were safe six months ago. Searching the chest in the month of June for something wanted, they had seen the case there.

Rarely had Lady Lydia heard a similar burst of reproach from Sir Dene's lips. In spite of the animosity which he had been professing for Tom latterly, as well as really indulging, his true feeling for him peeped out now. How *dared* she so asperse his grandson, the son of his dear dead son Geoffry, he asked her. Tom was a gentleman at heart, and would be one always; a true Clanwaring, with all a Clanwaring's honour; and he had a great mind to despatch Gander to Ireland, that he might bring him back to the Dene by force. Things had never gone well since Tom left. As to that bold

baggage up at the Trailing Indian—it must have been her fault more than his; she was older than Tom, and had ten times his confidence. Many a light-headed young fellow had done as much in his hot blood, and repented afterwards, and made all the better man for it. Sir Dene was a fool for sending Tom away—did my lady hear?—a fool. A fool for that and for a good deal more.

Thus he went on, saying in his anger anything that came uppermost; but no doubt giving vent to his true sentiments. My lady became as meek as a lamb, and metaphorically stopped her ears. Especially to the repeated insinuation that other folk as well as Tom knew where his keys were kept, and the diamonds too; the “other folk” pointing indubitably to herself, if not to her son Jarvis.

When the storm died out, and Sir Dene had sunk back in his chair, exhausted, Lady Lydia made a pretence of gently tending the fire, talking about the snow, and the weather generally, and the past night's company while she did it; any safe topic that occurred to her. She then withdrew from the room and left Sir Dene to his repose. It would not do, she saw clearly, to say too much about the diamonds whilst he was in this untoward frame of mind. That he doubted *her* she felt convinced; but she was not so sure that he doubted Jarvis. With her whole heart she wished the wedding over and the diamonds replaced. Had it been in her habit to pray, she would have prayed that Tuesday might arrive on eagle's wings.

Meanwhile as the day wore on, uneasiness arose in the Arde family at the non-arrival of its master. The Hall was in active preparation, not only for the wedding, but for the dinner-party that was to be given on the Monday night. Towards Saturday night the non-appearance of Mr. Arde was explained. Some farmers, making their slow way home from Worcester market, brought word that the London coaches, including the mail, had not been able to reach Worcester, from the state of the roads. Report spoke of “mountains of snow” in the low-lying lands around Moreton-in-the-Marsh. Mr. Tillett of Harebell Farm, knowing that Mrs. Arde was anxious and uneasy, called at the Hall to tell her this.



"Dear me!" she exclaimed, at the news. "Will the coaches not be able to get in to-day at all, think you, Mr. Tillett?"

Remembering the signs abroad, Mr. Tillett thought it hardly likely that the coaches could get in.

"If any of them does, it will be the mail," he remarked. "That is sure to make its way when it can, on account of the letter-bags."

"I suppose it is bad between this and Worcester?" said Mrs. Arde.

"Worse, madam, than I have ever known it. In places I hardly thought I should get my horse along."

"A pretty long time some of the people must have been driving home last night from Sir Dene's!" exclaimed May.

The farmer laughed. "They would arrive in time for breakfast, Miss May."

"Mamma," said May, in eager tones, after Mr. Tillett had left, "if it's like this, we shall not be able to dine at Beechhurst Dene to-morrow."

"Nonsense, May. There can be no difficulty at any time in going so short a distance."

May sighed. Even not dining at the Dene on the morrow in the society of Jarvis Clanwaring, would have seemed a relief to her. Now that the union was drawing near, all her old horror of it had returned. She hated it and dreaded it in what seemed, even to herself, a wicked degree. And yet—how was she to help it? She did not know, poor girl. Many and many a minute did she pass on her knees, praying that God would pity her and help her to put away the sin.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### AT THE FORGE.

CHRISTMAS-DAY dawned, and before the morning had well broken, the children from the gatekeeper's lodge trooped up to Beechhurst Dene, were admitted by the servants, and gathered

in a group at the top of the stairs near the doors of the best chambers, to sing their carol. It was a universal custom in those days, and, as a rule, servants in every great house were up early in consequence. Gander had been on thorns wishing to get into his master's chamber to see how he had slept, and to take him some tea ; but as Sir Dene chose to be first of all aroused on Christmas-Day by the carol singing, almost as if it were a religious rite, Gander waited.

The carol chosen by the children this year—or rather chosen for them by older heads—was a new one, called *The Carnal and the Crane*. It was tolerably lengthy, and was sung to a monotonous chant. Before the first verse was half ended, Mrs. Letsom's children, in their white night-gowns, were peeping through the balustrades above ; whilst below, near the foot of the stairs, stood all the servants, including Gander : partly hiding, however, not to daunt the shy young carol singers. The verses well through to the end, came the final benediction, spoken in their pure childish voices.

“Wish ye a merry Christmas, Sir Dene, and ladies and gentlemen all, and a happy new year, and a many on 'em.”

The little white-gowned people above clapped their hands ; the servants applauded, and it had been the invariable custom, during this applause, for Sir Dene's door to open and a small shower of sixpences, agreeing with the number of singers, to be thrown forth amongst them. The singers watched for this observance with eager eyes ; but on this morning they watched in vain. The door remained closed.

“Come you down, dears,” called gently one of the head women-servants, at length breaking the pause. “Come you down to your hot coffee. Sir Dene's asleep, maybe ; he's not well just now, and will send you out the sixpences later.”

A good breakfast was always provided for the little singers in the kitchen. And again on New-Year's morning, the same ceremony was repeated, with a second sixpence. But the carol chosen was a different one, and the after wish for a merry Christmas was changed to a Happy New Year.

In obedience to the call, the children went down as quietly as their timid little feet allowed them : and Gander went up. “Maybe he's not well enough to get up,” ran his thoughts,

"and is waiting for me to fetch the sixpences. I know they were put ready last night."

Knocking gently and receiving no response, Gander went in. The chamber appeared to be just as he had left it the previous night, the curtains were not undrawn. Turning to the bed, he gazed upon his master.

"The Lord be good to us!" ejaculated Gander.

For Sir Dene Clanwaring was lying with his face drawn, and apparently unconscious. He had had some sort of attack, probably paralysis.

Mr. Priar pronounced the seizure a very slight one, unattended with present danger. But there was no certainty that another might not succeed it, and the doctor enjoined strict quiet in the chamber and out of it.

"I'll lay a guinea it comes of the worry about the diamonds!" was Gander's private comment to Otto Clanwaring.

There was no dinner company. A message was despatched to inform the Ardes of what had occurred, and to stop their coming. Neither did any of the Beechhurst Dene people attend morning service, although it was both Sunday and Christmas-Day, the snowy state of the roads preventing it as much as the state of Sir Dene. The Ardes and their servants went, but they were nearer the church. Mrs. Arde and May would dine quietly at home, Captain Clanwaring their only visitor. It was the captain who had carried down the news of what had occurred, and had then received his invitation. The Miss Dickereens were not sent for as on the previous Christmas-Day, Mrs. Arde perhaps thinking they might not care to encounter the snow. Mrs. Arde was thoroughly put out by the prolonged absence of her husband. His decision was wanted on many details connected with the wedding, and he was not there to give it.

As for May, in her heart she could very well have dispensed with Captain Clanwaring also. Never had she felt more wretched than on this day. Try as she would she was unable to rally her spirits. A weight, as of impending evil, seemed to lie upon her: and had the coming Tuesday been to witness her execution, she could not have looked forward to it with a

sadder spirit. Recalling the happiness of the last Christmas, the contrast between that day and this was almost greater than she could bear. *Then* she had wondered whether things could ever look cloudy again, *now* the secret cry of her heart was that never again could they brighten. Ah, should not experience have taught her a lesson? That unclouded brightness had all too soon faded into night: might not the present gloom in like manner pass away? Heaven, however, was at work for Mary Arde, though she knew it not.

"I suppose, Miss May, there's no reason why I may not run home," spoke Susan Cole, towards twilight in the afternoon. "They've invited me to a dish o' tea."

"You may go. I shall not want you for anything, Susan," said May, rousing herself out of her apathy. "But you will have a very snowy walk."

"It won't hurt me, Miss May," said Susan, who would not have lost a gossip for all the snow in the world.

"I am glad to dine at home, for my part, instead of at the Dene," remarked May. "Friday's dinner was so tedious."

Susan shook her head. "Miss May, I don't like these breaks in old customs. For ever so many years the Hall has dined at the Dene on Christmas-Day, and the Dene with the Hall on New-Year's Day. Last year it was broken through. The master wasn't well enough to go to the Dene, or thought he wasn't, and so none of you went; and when New-Year's Day came round, Sir Dene wasn't well enough to come here. 'Twas odd that the custom on both sides should be interrupted. I said then it was a break-up, Miss May, and so it has proved. All the rest of Beechhurst Dene came here, but Sir Dene. He didn't, and he's the master."

"The rest did not all come," said May, quietly.

"All but Mr. Tom. And that same night he ceased to be one o' the Beechhurst Dene folk."

"Yes," said May. "He was turned out of his home."

"Served him right," retorted Susan. "Why did he get into mischief?"

May's face suddenly flushed painfully.

"I wish I was over in Paris, or somewhere," she exclaimed after a pause, "and all this worry ended."

"What worry?" questioned Susan.

"The wedding—and the people."

"Weddings come but once in a lifetime. It's right to make much of them, Miss May."

May was seated on a low toilette-chair covered with white dimity, for the colloquy was taking place in her bedroom. Very pretty she looked. Her cheeks were somewhat thinner than of yore, but had not lost their rose-colour: her beautiful, soft-brown eyes were lustrous still, her hair was abundant. The allusion to Paris meant more than the reader may imagine. A visit to the French capital was a rare thing in those days, and Captain Clanwaring had proposed to take May there after the marriage. They were not to settle down for some months, at least, but to take their pleasure; and the question of where the home should be was left in abeyance. Mr. and Mrs. Arde naturally wished it to be near them; Captain Clanwaring secretly wished they might get it. He could not live long away from London and its attractions, and did not mean to attempt it. "Once my wife, May will have to do as I please," he told himself. And, to prevent the question of home being decided beforehand, he had ingeniously laboured to instil into his bride-elect a wish to see Paris and its wonders, which he had never himself seen, as well as other places. Poor May thought that seeing wonders might help her to bear her lot, which was looking cruelly hard at present, whatever it might prove in reality. She had her own thoughts also as well as he. "Once I am his wife, I shall be able to put away all these old regrets and longings, all this misery. And the further I am away from here, the more chance there will be of succeeding." So the proposal to sojourn in Paris and elsewhere, had been rather eagerly received by May. In summer they were to come on a visit to the Hall.

"Talking of Tom Clanwaring, that girl's back at the Trailing Indian," cried free Susan, with her usual want of regard to what was an expedient topic of conversation, and what was not.

May lifted her head in quick surprise; and dropped it again.

"I came out of church to-day with Matty Pound," con-

tinued Susan, "and she began telling me that Emma Geach was back again—the sight of Mr. Geoffrey Clanwaring's grave may have put Matty in mind of it. Sam Pound called in at their cottage yesterday, and told them the girl arrived Friday evening by the waggon. Sam's in a fine way over it, his mother says, afraid he won't be wanted at the inn any longer. Very bold she must be to take Black by storm in that way, without saying with your leave or by your leave, now she's tired of Ireland!" added Susan on her own score. "Or perhaps Ireland has grown tired of her."

"That will do, Susan," coldly interposed Miss May, rising from her seat with a haughty gesture, to quit the room. "These things are nothing to me."

Neither had Susan Cole supposed they were, or could be, anything to her now. But in Susan's insatiable love of gossip, she had not been able to keep the news to herself.

"Won't you dress now, Miss May?"

"I shall not dress to-day more than I am dressed."

"Well, and I don't see there's any need of it," acquiesced Susan. "That silk is a lovely frock."

The frock was of that dark bright colour called Waterloo blue, after the somewhat recent battle. It was made in the fashion of the day—low neck and short sleeves, each edged with a quilling of white net, drooping lace falling beneath. May looked quite a young girl in it; scarcely more than a child. Susan watched her down the stairs; the graceful head thrown back more than usual.

"It's a sore point still, I can see," muttered Susan. "Why couldn't Tom Clanwaring have kept her there till the wedding was over and Miss May gone? Then——"

The words were arrested by the return of May. "Susan, mind you give your mother that little present I left out for her, and take her some mince-pies," she said. "And tell her that I will be sure to come and see her the first thing when I am back again in summer."

In her red cloth cloak and black poke bonnet, away started Susan to partake of the "dish of tea" at her brother's forge. It was open road all the way, and less difficult to traverse than she had expected. The forge was waiting for Susan: though



doubtful as to her coming. Mrs. Cole, the mother, always a mild, kindly woman, doubly so now she was getting in years, sat in her arm-chair in the full warmth of the parlour-fire, with her two sons: Harry, the prop and stay of the home and business, and Ham, who shod the horses, beat the iron, and did the rougher work. They were good sons, and it was thought that Harry, good-looking and popular, had kept single for his mother's sake. On the table stood a substantial tea, plum-cake, cold savoury sausages, and plates of buttered toast brought in by the young servant. One guest had already arrived, uninvited, Miss Emma Geach. In the old days Emma Geach had made herself tolerably at home at the forge; and after ill-report had touched her name, gentle Mrs. Cole, willing to "think no evil," had received her and been kind to her as before.

"That's Susan!—I thought she'd come," exclaimed Ham, as a stamping was heard at the door.

Ham, a contraction for Abraham, ran to admit her, and took the opportunity of whispering on the mat, the parlour-door being shut,

"Susan, Emma Geach is in there!"

"None of your stories, Ham!" cried Susan, sharply.

"She walked in just now, saying she had come to have tea with us, if mother would let her, for it was awful dull work up at the Trailing Indian," continued Ham. "She's just the same, Susan."

"What did mother say?" was Susan's indignant question.

"Say? Why nothing; except that she was welcome. You know what mother is."

"And Harry?"

"Harry's the same as mother for being civil to people," returned Ham.

"I've a good mind not to go in," said Susan. "Perhaps I might get telling her a bit of my mind."

"I wouldn't do that, Susan—it's Christmas Day. Besides, her affairs are no business of yours. She has not harmed you."

"I'm not so sure of that," disputed Susan, sharply. "'Twas not by straightforward means she got Tom Clanwaring into her

clutches, I know—and I nursed him all through his baby years. Is she going to stay to tea with us?”

“Well,” said Ham, simply, “we can’t turn her out. Neither mother nor Harry would do it, Susan.”

Susan, arming herself for battle, went in with her head up. Miss Geach looked completely at home. Her outdoor things were off; her abundant hair, carefully arranged, shone in the glow of the fire, and she was talking and laughing with Harry Cole in the old light, free manner. Susan, after greeting her mother, took off her things, and sat down to make tea. It might be that her propensity for gossip and to have her curiosity somewhat appeased as to the past, induced her to postpone hostilities, for she nodded to Miss Emma without too much disdain.

“And when did you get back?” demanded Susan, handing the young person her tea.

“Friday night,” said Emma, promptly.

“Oh! Had a stormy passage? I’ve heard it’s very bad at this season of the year.”

Whether Emma Geach did not understand the allusion, or would not take it, remained a question. After staring at the speaker for a moment or two in silence, she tasted her tea and asked for another lump of sugar.

“What sort of a place is Ireland to live in?” began Susan again satirically.

Another stare from Emma Geach.

“How should I know what sort of a place Ireland is?” she retorted. Susan Cole looked upon it as evasion, and was in two minds whether or not to tell her so; but at that moment her brother Harry kicked her under the table; and she knew it was as much as to say, She’s our guest for the time being and must be treated accordingly.

So the conversation turned on other matters. Sir Dene’s seizure; and the non-gathering at the Dene on Christmas Day in consequence. Next the prolonged absence of Mr. Arde came up, and the old lady expressed a devout hope that he would be home for the wedding on Tuesday.

“What wedding? Who’s going to be married?” inquired Miss Geach, when she heard this.

"Why, my young lady, Miss May's going to be married," said Susan, proud of relating so much. "Have you been living in a wood not to have heard this?"

"That Trailing Indian's worse than a wood now, as far as news goes," was Emma Geach's rather wrathful answer. "It isn't lively at the best of times; but nobody cares to come up to it through the snow. Since I entered the place I've not seen a soul except Black and Sam Pound. Black is sullen and won't talk; and Sam knows he must keep his tongue still, unless I choose to let him wag it. No fear I should hear of any wedding from the two."

"We've a grand dinner on Monday night," spoke Susan, by way of continuing her revelations. "'The Hall will be almost turned inside out. I can't think what will be done if the Squire don't get here."

"Report says no coaches are getting into Worcester," said Harry Cole. "It's to be hoped the roads will clear for the wedding."

"So it is," said Susan. "They are going to Paris when the wedding's over. Miss May's full of it."

"It's young Squire Scrope, I suppose," exclaimed Emma Geach.

"Miss Charlotte Scrope's to be bridesmaid," continued Susan, too busy to heed the question. "She and Miss May are to be dressed in white; only Miss May will have a veil and orange flowers in her bonnet, and Miss Scrope will not."

"I thought May Arde would have him some time," remarked Emma Geach. "Though Tom Scrope isn't the man for every girl's money. But Scrope Manor's a nice place; it isn't a bad match for her."

"Who was talking of Tom Scrope, pray?" loftily demanded Susan. "It isn't *him*."

"Who is it then?"

"Captain Clanwaring."

The revelation seemed to have some effect on Emma Geach. Her face became burning red, then changed to a deadly whiteness.

"Captain Clanwaring! He's not going to marry Miss Arde!"

"Well, I'm sure! perhaps you know better than I do," cried Susan. "It's Captain Jarvis Clanwaring, and nobody else."

Miss Geach appeared to be making an effort to recover from her surprise. "Once get away from a place for a few months, and all sorts of changes occur to astonish one," she said, with an air of indifference. "Since when has *he* been making up to her?"

"Since when?" repeated Susan. "Well, it's almost a twelvemonth since he first asked her. She'd have nothing to say to him then; nor for a long while after. He's got her now, though; or will have her next Tuesday; but I don't believe any man ever strove so hard for a girl yet, as the Captain has striven for her."

"And he has been trying for her a whole twelvemonth?" casually remarked Miss Emma.

"Ay," assented Susan. "And had begun it in secret before that: only he didn't dare say anything. Mother, have you heard that Mr. Otto's to be groomsman, through the heir not being able to come?"

"Mr. Otto?" returned the old mother. "I wish 'twas better weather, Susan: I'd have walked to church to see them married."

"How full it will be!" was Susan's comment.

Thus, one topic succeeding another, the evening passed away. About eight o'clock Susan took her departure: absolutely forbidding either of the brothers to escort her. She wouldn't have them wading through the snow that night, she said: and as her will had always been law with them they obeyed her. Harry Cole was ten or twelve years younger than she, and Ham twenty.

So Susan set out alone. She had gone a few yards down the road when she heard footsteps after her, tramping quickly through the snow. Believing that one of the two must be coming in spite of her injunction, she turned round, a sharp reprimand on her lips. But it proved to be Emma Geach.

"I just want to ask you something, Susan," she said, lowering her voice. "I had my reasons for not saying more before them at the forge. What did you mean by asking

if I'd had a stormy passage over the sea, and how I liked Ireland?"

"Why shouldn't I ask it?" returned Susan. "It's Ireland you've been to, as all the world knows."

"I've not been near Ireland," said the girl earnestly.

"Not near Ireland?" echoed Susan, noting the truthful accents. "Everybody said you went there."

"Went for what?"

"Well —'twas said you went with Mr. Tom Clanwaring from Bristol : or followed on over the sea after him."

Even in the starlight, Susan Cole could see the wonder that slowly spread itself over the girl's countenance. It seemed that just at first she did not understand the implication.

"Why, what fools they must be!" she indignantly cried, when the meaning dawned upon her. "They *couldn't* think it, Susan Cole."

"Everyone thought it; the whole parish, from one end to the other, thought it," was Susan's answer. "And said it, too."

"Not everyone; 'twasn't possible. Not Black —nor Captain Clanwaring."

"Both o' *them* did," said Susan emphatically. "'Twas Black, I believe, first spread it, and the captain retailed it after him. I've heard 'em both almost swear to it."

"They both knew better."

They talked together a few minutes longer, regardless of the night and the snow they stood in. Susan Cole went on her way at last with uplifted hands. She had heard something that almost stunned her.

"May Heaven have mercy on my poor young lady!" she groaned aloud to the frosty air. "What a sinner the man must be! —what a good-for-nothing hypocrite! Letting the good name of another be blackened for his! —Bother the ruts!"

For Susan had sunk into a snowdrift up to her knees. Getting out of it as best she could, she shook her garments, and went on again. A great question lay on her mind : ought she to impart what she had just heard to her mistress? — or keep silence on the point now that the wedding was so near?

Perhaps what really turned the scale was Susan's love of

gossip. With such a story in her keeping, it was next to impossible to be silent. After Mrs. Arde went to her chamber for the night, she found it invaded by Susan.

The woman whispered her tale, standing near her mistress on the hearthrug. As the red light played upon Mrs. Arde's face, Susan saw it take a pale hue, a haughty expression. That she was overwhelmed with dismay at the first moment, was all too evident. The next, she broke into laughter.

"The girl has been playing a trick upon you, Susan. How could you be so easily taken in? Captain Clanwaring, indeed! Does it stand to reason that it could be he?"

And, so prone to influence is the human mind, that Susan Cole veered round to her mistress's impression. It called up her temper.

"The vile huzzy!—to try her tricks upon me! Let me come across her: that's all!"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE WEDDING-DAY.

IN Mrs. Arde's drawing-room a strange company was assembled: strange in regard to appearance. For, while some of them wore gala attire suited to a marriage, others presented quite an ordinary aspect. Captain Clanwaring, for instance, was in the choicest of bridegroom's costume; May, on the contrary, wore a homely dress of ruby stuff. Lady Lydia was resplendent in silk and lace; Mrs. Arde and her sister wore simple morning gowns. Otto Clanwaring was attired to match his brother; Charlotte Scrope, the bridesmaid, a very pretty young girl, was as plainly dressed as the bride.

For this was the wedding morning; and the great question agitating those assembled, together with two or three other guests that need not be mentioned, was whether the marriage should or should not take place.

When the previous day did not bring Mr. Arde, and it was known that none of the London mails or other coaches, due



some days now, had reached Worcester, the Hall fell into consternation. Captain Clanwaring protested most strongly against delaying the ceremony, even though Tuesday morning brought not the Squire; but Mrs. Arde answered, sensibly enough, that without her husband there could be no marriage, as he was bringing the licence with him. May said little on the Monday, for or against the marriage; nothing, indeed; for she assumed to a certainty that she could not be married under these circumstances.

The dinner-party at the Hall had taken place the previous night, and was somewhat of a failure in its master's absence. Some of the invited guests, too, could not get there on account of the snow. Mrs. Arde presided; and her sister, who was staying with them, helped her to make the best of it. And so Tuesday came in, and there was no Squire. Mrs. Arde then despatched hasty messengers to as many friends bidden to the marriage as were within reach, to announce that it would not take place that day. Sir Dene was progressing favourably; but Mr. Priar, together with the physician called in from Worcester, enjoined the strictest quiet.

Captain Jarvis Clanwaring was early on the wing. Whilst it was yet dark, he quitted Beechhurst Dene, rode into Worcester, and procured a licence. By ten o'clock he was at home again, somewhat sooner than he had hoped to be, and brought word that the weather was breaking up.

"I cannot risk the chances of its being delayed even for a day," he observed in some agitation to his mother, as he went to attire himself for the ceremony. And my Lady Lydia answered, "Of course not:" though perhaps he had no idea of the imminent peril he was in. So Captain Clanwaring was driven to the Hall in full dress, licence in hand; and my lady, with the rest of the Beechhurst Dene company, speedily followed. His dismay was excessive when he found his bride not dressed, and Mrs. Arde quietly saying there could be no wedding that day.

"It is cruel!" said the captain to Mrs. Arde—the agitation he could not disguise speaking volumes to that lady's mind for the depth of his affection. "There is no impediment now—here is the licence: and perhaps by the time we are at church

Mr. Arde will have arrived, for the roads are undoubtedly clearing. Don't put off the wedding; it always brings bad luck."

Mrs. Arde glanced at her daughter, as much as to ask for her decision—at least so the sanguine captain interpreted it.

May, calm as the snow outside, and perhaps as cold, shook her head. "No, no," was all she said.

"But, my dear May, surely——"

"Not without papa," cried May, interrupting the bridegroom's remonstrance. "I will not be married in this uncertainty. My father may even not be safe for all we know."

In Captain Clanwaring's vexation, he gave vent to a word, spoken contemptuously. "Safe!" Recollecting himself on the instant, he implored her not to persist in her decision: May remained quietly firm: and, to the captain's angry fancy, it almost seemed that she was glad of the respite.

At that moment the church bells rang out a merry peal. Mrs. Arde, though she had sent to the Rector, had forgotten to send to the clerk. That functionary had gone to the church with the bell-ringers, expecting the wedding-party every minute: and this was the result. Captain Clanwaring, in spite of the cold, threw up the window at which they were standing.

"Listen, May! Surely you will not let them ring for nothing!"

"I really think the wedding ought to take place, my dear," spoke up old Miss Clewer, from the depths of her white quilted satin bonnet. "As my grand-nephew observes, a deferred wedding sometimes brings bad-luck with it: has resulted, within my own knowledge, in there being no wedding at all."

An awful suggestion for the bridegroom, his pale face flushing. Lady Lydia came to the rescue: not questioning May's decision, but that of Mrs. Arde. But that lady proved as firm as her daughter: and had never had any intention of being otherwise.

"My dear Lady Lydia, you ask an impossibility. I hinted to Captain Clanwaring yesterday, that the deeds of settlement were not signed: cannot be signed, until the arrival of Mr. Arde; and now you oblige me to speak out. Were it my

daughter's own wish that the ceremony should be solemnized, I could not accede to it. She cannot be married until the completion of the settlements."

Mrs. Arde spoke very decisively. She had of course right on her side, and her child's interests to study. Failing any settlement, all May possessed would become the property of the gallant captain : and even he and his mother could not decently urge that. No more was to be said. It would only be putting off the wedding for a day, as every one agreed : the weather was breaking, and a few hours would no doubt bring the Squire. Captain Clanwaring, terribly vexed, had to submit : but he did it with a bad grace, not caring to conceal his mortification. As to Otto, he had not spoken a word, for or against it.

And so the bells rang out still, with the effect of calling innumerable gazers to the church from far and near. A report had gone about the previous night that perhaps the ceremony might be postponed if the Squire did not arrive ; but when the bells rang out, it was assumed to be taking place.

"Do send to stop the bells, mamma !" pleaded May.

With her whole heart, Mrs. Arde wished her visitors would depart. It was an uncomfortable morning for her. No one seemed at ease ; she least of any. Soon after twelve o'clock, when some of them were preparing to leave, a party of morris-dancers appeared on the lawn. Of course all stayed, then, and crowded the windows.

"Harriet," whispered Mrs. Arde to her sister, "I cannot stand this any longer ; my nerves have been on the strain the whole morning, and are giving way. Do play hostess for a short time."

She slipped out of the room, put on a warm shawl and hood, and made her way to the small avenue, that ran beside the lawn. The snow had been swept, and she paced it thoughtfully, lifting her face to the cold fresh air, and looking through the bare branches at the morris-dancers. Fleet of foot and not ungraceful were those men ; their white attire decorated with coloured ribbons that kept time to their steps and staves. The figures were prolonged ; and the men did their best ; at Arde Hall the morris-dancers were sure of a meal and a

largesse, whenever a hard winter deprived them of their legitimate labour.

Though a tolerably common sight in those long-past winters, it was not a very frequent one, and some idle spectators entered the gates. They were the disappointed people, who had been to the church and found that no wedding was to take place. Mrs. Arde, pacing the solitary avenue, chanced to turn her attention from the dancers to these spectators, and saw Miss Emma Geach amongst them.

And yet, not exactly amongst them. They were crowding the gate and railings before the lawn; this girl had drawn close to the fence skirting the avenue, as though not caring to be noticed. She stood there, her old cloak muffled about her, looking at the dancers with a listless air.

Obeying the moment's impulse, Mrs. Arde stepped through the beech-trees and approached her. Putting aside the girl's naturally bold manners, Mrs. Arde had always rather liked Emma Geach, and pitied her condition—isolated from all good associations—at the Trailing Indian. This alone might have caused her to accost the girl; but she had another motive also. At the time that communication was made to her by Susan Cole on Sunday night, Mrs. Arde had fully disbelieved it, regarding it as a foolish libel on Captain Clanwaring; but since then, a very ugly doubt had insinuated itself ever and anon within her mind: and instinct now prompted her to set it at rest.

"Is it you, Emma? I heard you were back again."

"Yes, it's me," replied Emma, turning at the salutation. "I went to the church to see the wedding, ma'am; but it's said there is to be none."

"Not to-day. The Squire is absent."

"Can't get home for the roads," freely remarked Miss Emma. "I had a slow journey of it in the waggon."

"Where did you come from?"

"Well, I came from London. There's no need to conceal it, that I know of."

"Not from Ireland?"

The girl's eyes flashed with an angry light. "Yes, I hear *that* has been brought against me, but it's false as——"

"It has been said that when you left here you went to Bristol to join Mr. Tom Clanwaring," interrupted Mrs. Arde.

"When I left here I went straight to London, as I was bid to go by him who led me wrong; and I've never been away from London till I took the waggon to come down here again."

Mrs. Arde gazed at the girl's face, reading it eagerly. There was a savage look in it, a passionate ring in her voice, that spoke too surely of the truth.

"It was Tom Clanwaring's name that was coupled with yours, you know, Emma, even before you left the place."

"Mrs. Arde, I never did know it. If I had, I'm not sure but I should have set it right then. 'Twas a shame on him for folks to say it. Mr. Tom!—why, he had always been as good as a brother to me from the time I was that high. That is, as much of one as a gentleman can be to a poor girl. Mr. Tom Clanwaring is just as good and straightforward as the other is a cheating and a-lying coward. Black and him must have put their heads together and laid it on Mr. Tom."

"The other being Jarvis Clanwaring?" spoke Mrs. Arde.

"Jarvis Clanwaring, and none other. When his turn was served he just threw me over, Mrs. Arde. He did, the raskil; and I don't mind who knows it now. It's six months almost since he's been to see me or sent me aught to get me a crust of bread. I've been nigh starving, and might have starved outright but for a good woman whose room I lodged in: and helped me all she could."

"You are telling me the truth?" asked Mrs. Arde.

"As God hears me. I'd a mind to have told it out to Captain Clanwaring's face in the church this morning when he was being married: and I think I should have done it. Only the thought of one thing might have stopped me—and that's the pain it would have given Miss May. When I heard 'twas him she was going to marry I pitied her almost to crying; a good-for-nothing knave like him can't bring her any happiness."

"You should have told of this before to-day, for Miss May's sake," said Mrs. Arde sharply.

"I knew naught about the wedding till the night before last," spoke the girl; "I never knew he was living at Beech-

hurst Dene. He let me think he was about in places, serving with his regiment : but it seems he has sold out of it."

"Where is the baby?" whispered Mrs. Arde.

"It died when it was born, ma'am. And a lucky thing, too. Jarvis Clanwaring, grand as the world thinks him, is just a bad man, Mrs. Arde, made up of deceit and heartlessness. Bring me to him, and I'll say it to his face. He has been up to his ears in debt, too, this long while. Perhaps you didn't know that, either."

Mrs. Arde made no answer. The morris-dancers had brought their performance to an end : and the spectators were departing. Perhaps Mrs. Arde did not care to be seen talking to Emma Geach : for she wished her good-morning, and turned towards the house. What she had heard almost stunned her. May came to her chamber almost as she was entering it.

"Mamma," she cried, beseechingly, "you will not let this wedding take place before papa returns? Captain Clanwaring is still urging——"

"Be at rest, May," interrupted Mrs. Arde, bending to kiss her. "You shall certainly not marry before your father is here."

And the emphatic tone, telling of strange anger, a little surprised Miss May.

Careering into the faithful city of Worcester, the coachman driving his four fine horses somewhat faster than their usual majestic pace, the guard's horn blowing blasts of importance, went the Royal Mail. Along Sidbury, up College Street and High Street, through the Cross, and on to Foregate Street ; where it finally drew up before the two principal inns of the town, the Hop-pole and the Star and Garter. People had run out at their shop doors to see it pass ; a small crowd collected round it when it stopped : for it was the first mail that had reached Worcester since the detention. They concluded that it was the mail known to have started from London on the Friday, and were eager to learn what it had done with itself, and where the detention had occurred. A chorus of questions assailed the guard and coachman as they descended from their seats : and then it was discovered that this was not the loss mail at all, but the regular mail that had made the journey in



due course and with very little delay ; having quitted the Bull and Mouth the previous afternoon. In their checked curiosity the crowd began to move away again. This was Wednesday morning.

The mail brought only one passenger ; a sharp-looking active man, who leaped from the inside, and was without luggage. He was a little stared at ; and it was concluded that his business must be of importance, to induce him to travel in that ungenial weather and risk being buried in the snow.

“ Didn’t you see or hear anything of the lost mail ? ” questioned a bystander of the guard.

“ No ; nothing. It passed Woodstock, and it didn’t get to Chipping Norton ; so must be somewhere between the two places,” was the guard’s answer. “ But whether it’s above ground or buried fathoms deep in snow, is more than I can say.”

“ Had you much difficulty in getting along, guard ? ” questioned a gentleman.

“ No, sir. The worst was between Woodstock and Evesham. In places there we almost stuck fast ; but——”

“ Can I charter a horse and gig from this hotel, guard ? I want one immediately.”

The interruption, spoken in sharp, imperative tones, came from the passenger. Finding that he could charter a horse and gig, he ordered it to be got ready without delay, and went into the Star for a glass of hot brandy-and-water.

“ Wouldn’t you like some breakfast, sir—or luncheon ? ” asked the barmaid.

“ I have not time for either.”

The gig came to the door, together with a man whom the traveller had requested should accompany him : a tall, strong young fellow belonging to the Star and Garter stables. The landlord came out to see them start.

“ Have you far to go ? ” he asked.

“ About three or four miles, I fancy,” was the reply. “ I am a stranger to these parts.”

Away they started ; he taking the reins himself and whipping the horse into a canter ; turning down Broad Street, onwards over the Severn bridge, and so leaving the town. In due course he came to the neighbourhood of Beechhurst Dene, and

there arrested Mr. Jarvis Clanwaring. It was accomplished without the slightest trouble.

On the Tuesday evening a note had been delivered to Captain Clanwaring from Mrs. Arde, stating in unmistakably decisive terms that until the return of Mr. Arde there would be no marriage; all things must remain in abeyance. The captain could do nothing—except relieve his feelings by a little swearing in his chamber. On the following morning there was still no Mr. Arde; but in the course of it Captain Clanwaring walked over to the Hall. He was not admitted to the ladies—which he considered very strange. Susan Cole brought him a message that Miss May was suffering from headache, and her mistress was busy writing. So Captain Clanwaring, rather discomfited, returned home again. He was crossing the upper road, his eyes moodily bent on the ground, when a passing gig came to a standstill, its driver leaped down, and Jarvis Clanwaring, gentleman and ex-captain, found himself in custody.

“Curse you, Rilling!” was all he said, gnashing his teeth with impotent rage. For he knew the capturer well.

“It would have been done an hour or two earlier, captain, but for the snow keeping the mail back,” was the man’s equable answer. “A fine tether you’ve had of it altogether.”

The arrest was for a very large sum, and it was useless to fight against it. Persuasion and resistance would be alike futile, as the unfortunate captain knew quite well. Fate is stronger than we are. The arrest had been witnessed by at least two people, one of whom chanced to be Mark, the servant at the Hall, the other, Sam Pound; and the news spread.

Captor and captured, the gig and the supernumerary, proceeded to Beechhurst Dene. Jarvis was in a perfect fever to get free. There was only one way by which it could be accomplished—paying the money; or by bail that was as good as money. It was possible, though not very probable, that Sir Dene might have settled the matter could he have been appealed to; but the state in which he was lying, partially if not quite insensible, put any appeal to him out of the question. The heir, Dene, was not there; no one was there but the barrister.

"You will give bail for me, Otto?" said the crestfallen captain, who felt as if he would very much like to shoot some one—perhaps himself.

"Couldn't take Mr. Otto Clanwaring's bail," interposed Mr. Rilling gruffly: for nature had endowed him with an unusually deep voice. "Couldn't accept anybody's undertaking, except Sir Dene's."

"But Sir Dene is ill, you hear; paralyzed," remonstrated the unhappy captain.

"Yes, captain. More's the pity for you."

"If my brother gives you his undertaking it will be as safe as Sir Dene's," urged the captain. "He——"

"I could not give it, Jarvis," interposed the cautious barrister. "You must know that I am not in a position to take a debt upon me that might prove an incubus for the rest of my life. And where should I obtain the money, do you suppose, if called upon later to pay it?"

"It will stop my marriage," breathed Jarvis, biting his fevered lips. "I have been looking to that to save me from this gulf. Those cursed roads! But for Arde's delay, I should have been married and safely away. Otto! stretch a point for me."

"The counsellor's promise would be of no more worth than yours, captain—begging his pardon for saying so," reiterated the sheriff's officer. "Besides, there's more behind this," was the candid avowal.<sup>1</sup>

As Otto Clanwaring had felt sure of. If this one debt on which Jarvis was arrested were settled, a host of others, on which judgment had been obtained, lay behind it. In fact, it was pretty plain that Captain Clanwaring's career for the time was over.

"And my marriage?" he groaned. "What's to become of that?"

"You could not think of marrying Miss Arde now, though you were free," urged Otto, in his integrity. "At least, without informing them of the facts. It would be a most dishonourable thing so to deceive them."

"Hold your cant," retorted the exasperated prisoner.

There was no escape for him; none. In later weeks,

when Sir Dene was cognizant of the affair and able to converse upon it, he said that Jarvey's sins had come home to him. Rilling and the extra man and the captain all took their departure in the gig ; the latter wedged securely between the others.

When the Lady Lydia Clanwaring returned home towards dinner-time—for she, with Miss Ann Clewer and Mrs. Letsom, finding there would be no wedding that day, had driven over to Worcester—she found what had taken place. Her beloved son, for whom she would willingly have offered up the rest of the world in sacrifice at his shrine, had been ignominiously conveyed away a prisoner ; and was even then on his road by night coach to be lodged in one of the metropolitan gaols ! My lady raised the house with her fury.

Some one else arrived home that same evening—Squire Arde. For the long-delayed mail had contrived to free itself that day and reached Worcester at last, causing a hubbub and congratulation that some of the old citizens remembered fifty years after. The first thing the Squire heard when within his own doors was the news of Captain Clanwaring's arrest and of his heavy embarrassments. Many-tongued rumour had been exceedingly busy with the unfortunate captain's fame all the afternoon ; and facts, hitherto unsuspected, had come out in a remarkable manner.

Captain Clanwaring arrested—a prisoner in the Fleet!—and over head and ears in debt and embarrassment ! Captain Clanwaring, who but for those heavy snow-drifts would now be Mary's husband ! Squire Arde turned hot and cold as he listened.

What an escape for Mary ! How Jarvis Clanwaring had managed to stave off the evil day so long and to conceal the true state of things, was a mystery. Selling his commission had been a forced transaction—a stop-gap for the time being ; since then, Lady Lydia and others had helped him, including those harpies, the London money-lenders. The indignant Squire found that his daughter's money was indeed required ; and that there was urgent need of the marriage being hastened on.

“What an escape !” aspirated the Squire in solemn thank-

fulness. "And I—Heaven forgive me!—murmured at the delay caused by the snow-storm, little thinking that it was saving my child!"

Within the privacy of their own chamber that night, sitting over the fire, Mrs. Arde whispered another item of news in her husband's ear—that which was connected with Miss Emma Geach. For some little time the Squire would not take it in; but when convinced of its truth he began stamping about the room in wrath so great that poor Mrs. Arde was fain to beg him to be still, lest the household should think he was abusing her.

"Let them think it!" roared the Squire. "The desperate villain! And he would have made a wife of my innocent child!"

Scarcely giving time for the sun to rise, the Squire stamped up to the Trailing Indian, to "have it out" with Black. He told that worthy inn-keeper that he was a base villain, and not a shade better than the other villain; that they had sacrificed the good name of Tom Clanwaring, and nearly sacrificed the life's happiness of Miss Arde.

And she, Mary Arde: how did she take the disappointment relative to her marriage? To most brides-elect an interrupted marriage is, to say the least of it, mortifying. Not so to Mary Arde. She was as one released from despair. Susan Cole, who could not have kept silent had she been paid to do it, disclosed many things to her. Lightness came back to Mary's step, colour to her cheek: as though some special happiness sent by heaven had fallen upon her heart.

"She could not have liked him!" cried the wondering Squire to his wife.

"She did not," said Mrs. Arde. "I fear she liked Tom Clanwaring too well for that."

The Squire frowned at the unwelcome name. Though Tom had been shamefully aspersed, and been proved innocent where he had been thought guilty, he was not the more eligible to be "liked" by May. "And never will be," spoke the Squire hotly.

And that poor neglected scapegoat was never so much as thought of by the world, or by Beechhurst Dene. Tom Clan-

ware was in the place deemed most appropriate to him : some remote Irish bog, working out his sins.

And so the weeks wore on.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE LAST OF RANDY BLACK.

TURNING out of Harebell Farm, went Mary Barber. Rare indeed was the fact of her going abroad without any particular object ; and yet she was doing so this late afternoon. It had been the monthly wash at the farm : but the weather had been favourable for drying, and the close of this day, Wednesday, saw all the things put away in their appropriate presses and drawers. Mary Barber, assisted by one of the women-servants, had been ironing for many hours, and when the early tea was over, she indulged herself in a walk, partly because she had no pressing employment at the moment, chiefly that she had an unusual feeling of being stifled indoors. So, putting on her shawl and bonnet, away she went.

“Curious I should feel as if I wanted fresh air !” she soliloquized. “I must be growing old. Well, I’ve had my health and strength better than most people ; and there’s good work in me yet. Suppose I’d had a weak heart, like my poor sister—and died of it as she did ! Those boys of hers are getting on like a house on fire ; quite gentlefolk now, though their aunt, Mary Barber, can’t be called much more than an upper servant.”

Walking up Harebell Lane, she glanced at the budding hedges on either side. It was only February, yet the most lovely weather conceivable, almost warm enough for May. The prolonged snowstorm of the previous winter seemed to have revived the earth. Mary Barber went along enjoying the air ; shut up all day with the hot ironing stove, bending over the linen, this freshness was only too welcome. The sun was setting, birds chirped their last song, all nature seemed to rejoice. Primroses and violets nestled in the banks of the



lane : and hard Mary Barber actually stooped and gathered a few.

She was feeling less hard than usual that evening. Life had been all prose for her. Perhaps it was the unusual weariness that softened her ; weariness not physical, but of spirit. Her thoughts were not running in their usual groove.

“ Said Richard Pickering to me the other morning in Worcester, when I ran against him coming out of the hop-market, ‘ You should not stay on at Harebell Farm, Aunt Mary, but have a nice little home of your own, and live comfortably in it.’ It was the old pride in part made him say it ; neither he nor Willie have ever liked my being in service. ‘ We’d help you to the home,’ he went on, ‘ I and William ; we want you to have rest, Mary.’ And he’s right ; I am beginning to feel the need of rest, and work is getting hard for me. But I don’t care to be helped by them, and what I’ve saved isn’t yet quite enough to keep me.”

Approaching Harebell Pond—which she did not do once in two years, as a rule—the sad fate of her former master, Robert Owen, recurred to her. Every circumstance connected with it flashed into her mind as vividly as though it had happened yesterday. Her singular dream, and the subsequent disappearance : her visit to the inn in the morning, when Emma Geach was an infant a few hours old, and the mother lay in danger upstairs ; all the commotion and uncertainty, until the water gave up its secret ; all the bygone events passed in succession through her mind.

As she passed the pond, she slightly quickened her steps. A few yards onward and she grew undecided whether to go straight on through the gate, leading into some fields on Sir Dene’s home farm, or continue her way up the lane. She chose the latter, and in time reached the Trailing Indian. Mary Barber turned her eyes upon that hostelry with some curiosity ; its past association rendering it always a place of interest to her. Since Miss Emma Geach’s return to it, the inn had shown some slight signs of renewed life. That bustling damsel made a pleasanter hostess than Black and Sam Pound had made hosts ; and stragglers were beginning to drop in

again for half-pints of ale or cider. As to Sam, his worse fears had been realized ; he was dismissed.

The sunset had turned to crimson, and the front casements reflected the red glow. The side door of the inn stood open, but there was no other sign of life or habitation about the dwelling. It looked very solitary, and everything around was still, including the evening air.

"She's out," thought Mary Barber, "or there'd be some clatter going on. As to Black——"

The words were arrested by a strange sound. If ever Mary Barber heard a groan of agony, she heard one then. Where did it come from ? She looked about her, and heard another. No mistake now ; they came from the house.

"Anything the matter ?" she called out, making her way to the side door.

She was answered by a moan. Mary Barber was not timid ; she had seen too many sad sights in her life for that, ghosts included ; but it was certain that a fear seized her then, and she would willingly have turned back, rather than have entered.

"What is it ?" she asked, halting at the kitchen door.

Ah, what was it ? Mary Barber groaned herself when she entered. Randy Black was stretched on the kitchen floor, bleeding from a wound in the side, his gun lying beside him.

He had taken the gun up to clean it, unconscious that it was loaded. The charge went off and shot him. It appeared that he had lent the gun to one of his friends, James Thaxted. When the man returned it Black asked if it was charged, and Thaxted replied No. *He* had understood Black to ask if he had drawn the charge ? —as was explained when too late.

Whatever ill had encompassed Black's life, Mary Barber could only feel the deepest compassion for him now. Something in his face would have told her that the injury was mortal without the words he uttered, "It's my death ! it's my death."

What could she do alone ? Emma Geach had gone off to Worcester for the Wednesday's market, and to buy herself

some gowns. Whilst she was on her knees, doing what she could to staunch the blood, and nearly at her wits'-end, young Cole entered ; and Mary Barber said Providence had sent him.

"You're fleet of foot, Ham. Put out your best speed, lad, and send Priar up here. And list," she added in a whisper, "when Priar's off, run round to the parson, and ask *him* to come also. If ever mortal man wanted shriving when his soul was on the wing, it must be this one lying here."

Apparently Black was thinking the same. Whence he gathered his deductions perhaps he could not have defined ; but that death was close upon him he felt certain. And strange though it may be to say it of this hardened and bad man, whose whole life had been marked by recklessness ; who had laughed at death, and set it, and what must come after it, at defiance as a thing that could not concern him—he was now shrinking from it in terror, the veriest coward. Such instances have been known ; where this awful terror has assailed a soul at the close of an ill-spent life. It was not the life so suddenly cut short that the man was regretting ; that did not appear to give him a thought ; it was the dread judgment to which he was hastening.

Mary Barber turned him round, for he had been lying on the wound, and found a pillow to put under his head on the kitchen bricks, and gave him a little brandy which he asked for. The bleeding seemed to stop, and he was in less pain. "When did it happen?" she asked.

"Only just before you came," groaned Black. "I'd got the gun muzzle upwards, and was turning round to light a candle."

And then he gave vent to words and complaints that surely would never have been wrung from him in health ; ay, and *prayers*. Prayers that he would at all times have ridiculed. Prayers for mercy : prayers to be let perish for ever as a dog and be no more heard of after death. Mary Barber was horrified. Compassionating him with her whole heart, she knelt down, raised her hands, and asked aloud for pardon for him, even at the eleventh hour. The man was beside himself with fear. He called for more brandy, and when

she hesitated to give it to him, he swore at her in some of the worst language he had ever used in his wild career. The next minute he was beseeching her and Heaven alike to forgive him. She administered a little brandy : not much, for she was afraid to do it without the sanction of Mr. Priar.

"Priar will be up soon, Black," she said. "You shall have more then if he'll let you."

The man's faculties appeared to be almost supernaturally clear ; his intellect and memory bright as they had ever been in life ; his reason as free : but a degree of physical exhaustion came on, and then he lay comparatively still. Mary Barber used the interval to tell him about the thief on the cross, and Black hushed his voice while he listened.

"He had been bad, too, like you, Black ; but the Saviour pardoned him. With the Lord it is only to repent, and ask, and have."

Black turned his head about on the pillow and moaned and muttered ; but was still quiet. A thought came into the woman's mind, and she promptly acted on it.

"I'd like to ask you one thing, Black, while there's time ; it won't hurt you to answer it now, one way or the other. The bag of money stolen from Sir Dene's parlour that New Year's Day—was it you took it?"

"Was it me took it?" retorted Black with a touch of his old fierceness. "What d'ye mean?"

"Some of 'em suspect Tom Clanwaring of it still ; as it strikes me," was her reply. "Only this very morning Squire Arde, who came up to the farm wanting to see the master, stood by my ironing-board, talking about it. I said 'twas curious Mr. Tom didn't come back now things against him had been cleared up. At that the Squire went into a passion, and said things against him were not cleared up, and the fellow was not wanted back. It could have been nothing but the money he was thinking of, Black ; there's nought else lying against Mr. Tom now."

Black's eyes were cast up towards her ; dark, and almost fierce as ever, were they. But he made no answer.

"Tom Clanwaring never harmed you, Randy. He always showed himself friendly, and did you many a good turn. If

'twas you took the money, you might confess to it now, for his sake."

"The man who took the money was Captain Clanwaring."

"What?" cried Mary Barber, interrupting the hoarse tones.

"The man who took the money was Jarvis Clanwaring," repeated Black. "I swear it with my dying breath."

Mary Barber peered into Black's face, believing his senses were deserting him. He saw the doubt.

"That same Saturday night, soon after I got home here myself, up came Captain Clanwaring. He owed me money, and had got frightened for fear I should let out things he didn't want known—for in the morning I told him I'd do it if he didn't pay me. He gave me just half what he owed; and I wondered where he had got it from, for he was as hard up himself as any poor devil——"

"Was it for baccy?" she interrupted.

"No, 'twasn't for baccy," retorted Black. "'Twas put upon baccy, and that's enough. Just a few days after, Squire Arde was here, and began fishing to know whether 'twas me took Sir Dene's bag o' money. 'Twas the first time I'd heard of any money being stolen; and I knew at once who had taken it, and where Captain Clanwaring had got his money from. I saw the bag in his hands and the notes and gold in it."

"Captain Clanwaring must have as many sins to answer for as you, Black," spoke Mary Barber, drawing a deep breath. "Perhaps more in the sight of Heaven. Why didn't you tell of this, and clear Tom Clanwaring?"

Black shook his head. "I couldn't tell of the captain *then*, though I used to threaten it. His interests were mine till I'd got my money from him in full. And he might have turned on me, for he knew a thing or two."

It appeared to have been a case of rogue cutting rogue. That Captain Clanwaring and Black were mutually afraid of each other, and had acted in accordance with it, was evident.

A cry from Black startled Mary Barber out of her momentary reflection. His side had begun to bleed again, bringing back all his terror. Perhaps in the past few minutes,

feeling easier in himself, and believing the bleeding had stopped, he had been indulging some faint idea of recovery.

"I'd lead a different life !" he aspirated, as if making a promise to the empty air.

The most welcome sound that ever greeted Mary Barber's ear, was that of gig-wheels. Mr. Priar and his apprentice had come speeding up, followed by Harry Cole and others. After apprising the surgeon of what had happened, Ham had gone on his way to impart the news generally. Mr. Priar speedily cleared the kitchen of the interlopers pressing into it. Mary Barber and Harry Cole alone were suffered to remain ; and the clergyman when he arrived.

Alas ! nothing could be done to save the life so swiftly passing. All the skill of the medical man could not prolong it by one hour beyond its allotted time. Black was not moved from his position. On the kitchen-floor he had fallen, and on the kitchen-floor he remained to die. Some blankets were gently passed under him ; but he might not be further disturbed.

In the presence of the clergyman and doctor, of Mary Barber and of Harry Cole, he made a confession : some dim hope that it might serve him when he should stand before the Great Judge in that dread hereafter, urging him to do it. Petty sins were avowed, such as smuggling and poaching and receiving stolen goods ; a whole catalogue of such doings, that appeared to have been always running on. These lighter offences Black did not himself seem to think much of ; but there were others. Grave crimes, beside which the lighter crimes sank to little. Randy Black had the lives of three men on his soul ; the pedlar, once or twice spoken of here, a gamekeeper, and Robert Owen.

The only one wilfully and deliberately murdered was the pedlar. Stupefied by drink, perhaps purposely given him, he had been killed in the dead of night by Black's own hand, and afterwards buried by him and the ostler Joe ; his box of wares, some of them real gold and silver, being the inducing motive. The gamekeeper was shot by Black in a night fray, but not of deliberate intention ; guns were fired on both sides. The third Robert Owen, had been wilfully assaulted, but not wilfully murdered.



That Black was telling the truth in this, his dying hour, was all too evident; nay, he sought to make himself out rather worse than better. Once this awful hour comes upon hitherto careless sinners, there can be no playing with conscience.

On that long-past Easter night, Mr. Owen, after quitting his daughter Maria and Geoffry Clanwaring, had been traced to the two-acre meadow; the young man, Parkes, having watched him cross it on his way to the cow-shed. No after trace of him—in life—could be discovered, and this loss Black now supplied.

After leaving the shed, Mr. Owen crossed the meadow towards home. In the narrow path, so often mentioned between the grove and the pond, he halted and leaned over the fence with what purpose could never be known. Black, concealed in the trees with a heavy stick, came out and dealt him a sudden and violent blow on the back of his head. It must have stunned Mr. Owen, for he fell forward and lay without motion: Black took him by the heels and tumbled him over into the pond. So there he lay and was drowned without a struggle, his senseless condition preventing his making any effort to save himself.

“As the Lord above hears me, I did not mean to kill him,” gasped Black, when he had related this. “Owen was spying on me and my doings, and I wanted to serve him out for it; break an arm or a leg, or give his skull a bit of a crack, and so teach him not to come interfering in matters that were none of his; but I never meant to kill him. I thought he’d scramble out of the pond sure enough.”

“But you must have gone into the grove to watch for and assault him,” remarked the surgeon.

“So I did,” was the ready avowal. “Things had crossed me that Sunday, and I had a lot of drink in me. I’d slept some of it off, but not all. While Joe was shutting up, just after I awoke, Owen of the farm came slap into my head. I thought I’d go and see whether he was sneaking and peeping then; and I caught up my stick and went and hid in the grove and waited—I knew his cow was sick, and fancied he might be coming to it the last thing. But I swear I never meant to kill him; and when I came home here and told Joe, we both

chuckled over the sousing he'd got, and I went up to bed picturing him trailing through the lane like a drowned rat. Next morning, when Joe came creeping to my bedside, saying Owen hadn't turned up nowhere and was being inquired for here, I was hard of belief, and told him to his face he was lying. No, I never killed him wilfully."

Mary Barber threw her hands up to her face with a sob of emotion. Rarely had she been so moved. Memory was busy with her. The vivid dream foreshadowing her master's death, passed through her mind for a second time that evening in all its details. She saw Mr. Owen walking in from church that Easter-Sunday, after partaking of the Lord's Supper; saw him seated at his table entertaining Sir Dene's son and his son-in-law, Geoffry Clanwaring; saw him standing in the yard at sunset speaking to Joan. It was all before her now. The sunset fell across his face, lighting up its remarkable beauty. Mary Barber had seen many a handsome man in her life, gentle and simple, but never one whose form and face equalled Robert Owen's. She had suspected Black at the time, had suspected him since, for her dream had certainly, in some vague way, pointed to him and the Trailing Indian as being concerned in the disappearance, and now she found that her suspicions had been correct. Had Mary Barber needed her belief in dreams strengthened, this would have done it.

But, if her faith in dreams was confirmed, that in regard to supernatural appearances was destined at the same time to receive a shock. Robert Owen's ghost had been no ghost at all. Knowing what Mary Barber knew, remembering the experiences of her earlier life, and what she had once seen in the Hollow Field—her dead sister on the stile—no power, human or divine, could have shaken her belief in the possibility of the dead appearing to mortal eyes. In this one instance, regarding her late master, she found that she and others had been imposed upon.

The strange figure, appearing to the world, and popularly believed to be the unfortunate Robert Owen's spirit, was after all, only flesh and blood. Black and some of his associates, including Michael Geach, set their heads to work, and turned Mr. Owen's death to good account. The happy thought was

Black's. They improvised a ghost to represent him ; the object of course being to keep people away from Harebell Lane, and that part of the fields overlooking the lane. The men, who were in the habit of stealing up the Lane to Black's with booty about them, had been seen so many times of late that they had grown afraid, and flatly told Black they must give up the game unless something could be done to insure safety. Robert Owen's ghost effected this. It was far more easy to get up his ghost than it would have been that of most people with those strongly marked features—the flowing beard and magpie cap.

A silvery beard was procured, and another magpie cap, also clothes and a walking-stick similar to those used by Mr. Owen the night of his death. Michael Geach was the ghost. As tall as Mr. Owen, he possessed the same well-formed, handsome cast of features. Arrayed in clothes and beard and white-bordered cap, Michael Geach might have been sworn to as Robert Owen. The best proof was that he deceived Randy Black himself.

When Black entered his house that unlucky night in a state not easily described, and confessed that he had seen Robert Owen's ghost, his belief was genuine. That the man, hardened though he was in crime, had Mr. Owen's death somewhat on his conscience, various signs betrayed to those about him. Coming home from Hurst Leet that moonlight night, what with the natural loneliness of the lane, its weird shadows and its awful pond, it was only to be expected he should begin thinking of the dead-and-gone farmer ; a very unpleasant thought, which made him quicken his pace. Had it been to save Black's life, he could not have helped turning his eyes in a dread fascination to the fence above, whence Robert Owen had fallen. And there stood Robert Owen himself ; or rather his spirit, as Black supposed it to be ; white beard, magpie cap, and the coat he was drowned in conspicuous.

It was strange that the man, hardened in sin and the world's worst ways, should have been stricken with this most awful terror. The idea that it was Geach never crossed him ; for he had reason to believe that Geach was far away on the Cornish coast—gone there on some secret mission connected with a privateer. Geach, however, had arrived at the Trailing Indian

that night during Black's absence. Whilst waiting for the landlord, it occurred to him that he might make use of the time, and he arrayed himself in the coat which was kept at the inn, and stole out to frighten the world, putting on the cap and beard when safe in the trees. Geach no doubt saw Black's state of terror, and enjoyed it too much to speak, though he vowed to Black afterwards that he did not recognize him.

Perhaps the strangest fact of all connected with that strange business was that Black retained his fear. Even when he discovered that the ghost was only his friend Michael Geach the fear never left him. In spite of the great fact that Robert Owen's spirit had never really appeared at all, Black lived thenceforward in a state of terror lest he should see it. Time, instead of wearing off the impression, only seemed to strengthen it. He hardly dared go out at night. As the years went on he did not care to remain alone in the inn after dark. The day of the ghost had, so to say, gone by, and its remembrance nearly faded from the mind of the public; yet Black retained his fear. Once more he thought he saw it: when he met Major Fife at twilight in the dark walk at Beechhurst Dene and mistook him for Robert Owen; and he was never undeceived.

And so the mystery attaching to the dead master of Harebell Farm was cleared up at last. Robert Owen had slept peacefully in his grave, and had never appeared at all to disturb the community. The people connected with the Trailing Indian—meaning those who were not in the secret, and shared the popular belief in the ghost—might have noticed, had they been sufficiently observant, that the apparition was only seen during the occasional sojourns of Michael Geach at the inn, and not at all after his death. Geach once got up a pretended fit of terror on his own part. Late one night he rushed into the Trailing Indian in a state of agitation, and told a story to the gaping company of having seen the ghost in the lane.

But the fear that lay on Black, lasting for many years, was so devoid of reason as to be almost incredible. It wore him to a shadow, embittered his life, and left him no rest, sleeping or waking. Could it have been the finger of God resting on

him, and working out the man's punishment? Mary Barber assumed so.

"It seems the Lord has been punishing you, Black," she observed compassionately, after listening to the confession of these dreadful sufferings from terror. "Let us hope that He will be the more lenient to you now, and mercifully hear your cries for pardon."

## CHAPTER XX.

### WITH SIR DENE.

ADVANCING at a jog-trot up Harebell Lane, came a horse carrying a country yeoman, Charles Parker—who, by the way, was first cousin to the Parker connected with the stolen money—and Miss Emma Geach on a pillion behind him.

In those days it was almost as common to see a horse carrying two people as one; occasionally it was made to carry three. Mr. Parker was returning home from Wednesday's market at Worcester, whither he had conveyed his daughter in the morning, and left her there on a visit. Happening to overtake Miss Geach on the road when returning, he good-naturedly asked her to mount. The party had almost reached the Trailing Indian when Mary Barber turned out of the inn and met it. Emma Geach's laugh was echoing on the air; a musical laugh, truth to tell, and well-known; otherwise Mary Barber might not have recognized her in the dark night. The woman motioned for them to stop, and spoke.

"Why, it's you, Mrs. Barber!" cried the yeoman. "Good-evening to ye."

"Waiting for your sweetheart, Mary Barber?" asked free-spoken Miss Emma.

"If you'll get down, girl, I'll tell you what has happened; you'll see then whether this is a time to be looking for sweethearts," was Mary Barber's answer.

The solemn tone struck on the ears of both her listeners, and Miss Emma slipped off the horse to the ground. Mary

Barber related the accident. To give Emma Geach her due, she was sobered on the instant, and much concerned for Black.

"I heard Thaxted tell Black with my own ears that the gun wasn't charged," she said angrily. "What did the man mean by it?"

"That's what Black said," replied Mary Barber.

"Is he badly hurt?" resumed Emma. "Mr. Parker, I thank you for giving me a lift, and saving me the walk home. The devil take Thaxted," she added, preparing to hasten into the inn.

But Mary Barber put out her hand to detain the girl, willing to soften the shock even to her, and whispered how worse than "bad" the hurt was.

"It isn't for death, surely!" exclaimed Emma, her voice hushed with fear.

"Ay, but it is," was Mary Barber's answer. "No good beating about the bush, Emma Geach. Black's dead."

"Dead! Dead already!"

"About ten minutes ago. Mr. Priar and a lot of them are there, men and women. I could do no further good, and came away."

Very much to Mary Barber's surprise, who had deemed her to be without feeling, the girl burst into a passionate flood of tears. All her days, Black had been harsh and unkind to her, and they had lived in constant warfare; but it seemed that she bore him some natural affection.

Leaving them to enter the house—for Charles Parker got off his horse—Mary Barber went on down the lane. An idea had entered her head that she should proceed at once to Beechhurst Dene, and request an interview with its master. Sundry things disclosed that night had surprised her not a little, and she felt it to be her "bounden duty," as she put it to herself, to relate them to Sir Dene.

"It's not too late," ran her thoughts; "it can't be much more than half-past eight. Poor Black hasn't been long going. The Lord keep us all from a sudden death like his!"

No; the wound had speedily done its work. Only about four hours from the commencement to the close. It was a



strange coincidence, that Mary Barber should have been present when both Black and his wife were dying.

"'Twas no chance took me out this evening," she murmured. "I wonder how long it is since I went out merely for a walk without some object in view? Why, it must be years. That feeling of wanting a breath of fresh air has never come to me before. 'Twas just the hand of Providence guiding me."

Arriving at the gate of Beechhurst Dene, she stopped; hesitating whether to enter, or wait until morning. An impulse strongly prompted her to go on, spite of the lateness of the hour, and her working attire.

"But Sir Dene will excuse it all," she decided, opening the small gate. "Gander will know whether I can see him to-night or not."

At that moment footsteps were heard in the lane, and she waited to see who might be following her. It was Harry Cole. Mary Barber leaned her arms upon the gate whilst they talked together of what had occurred.

"I never thought his hand was in Mr. Owen's death," remarked Cole. "Some of you fancied it at the time, I remember, but I didn't; he carried it off very brazenly."

"He told me something else before you and Priar came in," observed Mary Barber. "That money lost out of Sir Dene's parlour—it was Jarvis Clanwaring took it. Black says he was sure of it."

"So was I," laconically replied Cole.

"You were!"

"Well, I did think it was him. That same night, just at the very time the money must have been stolen, I saw Captain Clanwaring at Sir Dene's secretary. Oh, it was the captain: no doubt of it."

"And why couldn't you open your mouth and say so?" demanded Mary Barber, hotly.

"Because—I was bid not to," was the sentence in Cole's mind. But he substituted another for it: "Because it was no business of mine."

"No business of yours! It would have cleared Tom Clanwaring."

"Oh nonsense," said Cole. "Nobody really suspected

Mr. Tom. Well, good-night, Mrs. Barber. This has been a sad evening's work."

Sir Dene Clanwaring had almost recovered from the seizure in December, and was himself again. It was thought that when summer weather set in, he might become as well as ever he had been of late years. Meanwhile, by Mr. Priar's orders, all topics likely to excite him were avoided: so that Sir Dene was living very much in ignorance as to the doings of his neighbours. Jarvis Clanwaring he knew all about. That gentleman was languishing away his days in prison (in a rather jolly manner, probably, after the fashion of the time): for by no manner of persuasion could Sir Dene be brought to release him. Lady Lydia sighed and prayed her heart out, but Sir Dene was deaf; flatly refusing to help at all, and calling him to Lady Lydia's face by any name but that of gentleman. Sir Dene resented the deceit practised on the Ardes. That a grandson of his, over head and ears in debt, should have palmed himself off as an honourable man, and attempted to marry Mary Arde, brought a blush of shame to his old brow. He knew all about the diamonds, too, and had got them home again; having furnished Otto with money for their redemption. Altogether, Jarvis had done for himself pretty effectually, and Sir Dene assured Lady Lydia that the only fit place for him was the prison he was in. Which gave her the most intense aggravation.

"Can I say a word to Mr. Gander?" asked Mary Barber, of the servant who came to the door.

Gander happened to hear the question himself, and came forward. He and Mary Barber were great friends.

"See Sir Dene? Yes, and welcome," said he, in reply to her application. "'Twill be a bit of a change for him. It's dull enough for the poor master, sitting up there alone hour after hour."

"Why don't my lady sit with him?" was Mary Barber's rejoinder. And Gander shook his head.

"Sir Dene don't care to have too much of *her* company. She only gets worrying of him to loose the captain out of prison."

"I've had a rare shock to-night," said Mary Barber, as she

and Gander ascended the staircase together. "Randy Black's dead."

"No!" exclaimed the butler. "Why, what has he died of? 'Twas only yesterday I saw him as well as usual."

"Ay, so did I," she answered. "His gun went off and killed him. I'm wanting to tell Sir Dene something that he said in dying."

But that they had reached Sir Dene's door, Gander might have asked further details, and what the something was: for he possessed his share of curiosity like the rest of the world.

Sir Dene was pacing his sitting-room, always a favourite exercise of his, and the only one he could take now. Mary Barber had not seen him for some months: and the change age and illness had made in him, perhaps trouble also, startled her. His once stately form was bent; he almost tottered as he walked, leaning heavily on his stick; his fine blue eyes were dulled; his face was haggard and strangely grey. Gander shut them in together.

"I made bold to come at this late hour and ask if I might see you, Sir Dene, having a matter to disclose to you," she said, curtsying. "Gander thought you'd please to see me, sir."

Though it was only Mary Barber, Sir Dene in his unfailing courtesy placed a chair near the fire, as he might have placed it for a lady, and motioned to her to take it. His own arm-chair stood opposite; he sat down, and bent his head towards her, leaning both hands on his stick.

"I have heard to-night what has surprised me, Sir Dene: and I think you ought to hear it too," she began. "So I stepped here without loss of time. And I hope, sir, you'll pardon my coming in my working things; there was no time to go home and change them."

Probably Sir Dene had not noticed whether she wore old things or new: his sight and senses were growing dim for these trifles of existence. Two wax candles burned on the mantelpiece, and the fire threw its blaze on every portion of the small, comfortable sitting-room.

In low cautious tones—for Gander had warned her not to

startle his master—she imparted the events of the night: Randy Black's accident and death; and then went on to his confession.

"Poor Owen! murdered after all!" interposed Sir Dene. "But I always said that tale about his ghost was the most ridiculous in the world. Only fit for children and simpletons."

"Well, sir, 'twas what drove my young master, Mr. William Owen away," she returned. "That, and naught else."

"So I have heard," said Sir Dene: "confided to me by Squire Arde after his departure. Had I known it before the young man went, I should have tried to reason him out of his folly. Ghosts are all nonsense, you know, Mrs. Barber."

Remembering the ghost she herself had undoubtedly seen; ay, and more than one, as she fully believed, during the experiences of her life, Mary Barber's opinion was wholly different. And she was not one to shrink from expressing her opinion, even to Sir Dene.

"That the spirits of the dead visit this world sometimes, there's little doubt about, Sir Dene; but it is not given to everyone to see them. I have seen them, and so can speak to it. I believe in dreams, too; coming as warnings of things about to happen."

"Ay, dreams are quite another thing," readily acquiesced the old man. "I've had a queer dream or two myself."

The little interruption over, Mary Barber went on to the matter she had come to relate: that it was not Tom Clanwaring who had taken the bag of money, but the captain. Sir Dene, who had been tracing the pattern of the carpet with his stick, lifted his head suddenly.

"Jarvis Clanwaring?" he cried, looking at her.

"Yes, sir. Black vowed 'twas him with his dying breath. Harry Cole, too, confirmed it in the lane: for he saw the captain at your secretary." And she repeated what both had said, word for word. It did not appear to surprise Sir Dene very much.

"Look you, Mrs. Barber, that ill-doing grandson of mine—that I'm ashamed to own, and think it a mercy his father was not spared to be pained by his misconduct—was hard-up for money about that time; and that's how it was, I expect.

For that matter, I don't know when he was not hard up—as the world has since learnt. So he took the money, did he! He's a disgrace to the name of Clanwaring."

"But it's not I that would have intruded to speak of it to you, Sir Dene; I hope I know what respect means better than that——"

"You are welcome," interrupted Sir Dene. "He has been the town's talk."

"Only that I thought it my bounden duty, sir, to clear poor Mr. Tom," she continued. "That theft, you know, was laid by some people at Mr. Tom's door."

"The people were fools," was Sir Dene's retort.

The remark surprised Mary Barber. She had recently felt so fully persuaded that it must be the one only matter against Tom Clanwaring, preventing his recall; for she knew of nothing else. This she said to Sir Dene.

"No, no," he answered. "My grandson, Tom, is a true Clanwaring: no fear that he would steal money. You ought to know him better than that, Mrs. Barber."

"And I do, sir. When the accusation was brought against him, my anger was very great. I knew he couldn't have done it."

"It's that other affair, at the Trailing Indian, that has been on my mind," said Sir Dene, acknowledging more to this woman than he had to others: but reticence sometimes forsakes us at the last. "The girl has left Ireland, and is back again, I hear."

Mary Barber's hard grey eyes opened wide. What was Sir Dene talking about?

"Do you mean Emma Geach, sir?" she asked.

"Brazen baggage!" ejaculated Sir Dene. "Of course I mean her."

"But, Sir Dene," returned the woman, all the emphasis she possessed in her tones, "that—that was not Tom Clanwaring."

"Do you think it was me?" retorted Sir Dene, angrily, believing she wished to impose on him in her zeal for Tom. "It's not your place to tell white lies to me, Mrs. Barber."

"I've never told lies, either white or black, in all my life, Sir Dene, and I'm sure I wouldn't begin now," said independent

Mary Barber. "The girl's sweetheart was not Mr. Tom, but Captain Clanwaring."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried Sir Dene.

"Sir, it's gospel truth. That was Captain Clanwaring. Mr. Tom knew nothing about it: and I don't suppose he has heard of it to this day. Sir Dene, I thought Squire Arde might have told you."

The two sat looking at each other: she fancying his memory must be in fault; he wondering whether he was listening to a fable.

Since the disclosure made by Miss Geach, the truth of the affair had become public property, and of course had reached the servants' ears at Beechhurst Dene. But Mr. Priar's orders that Sir Dene should not in any way be excited until he grew stronger were peremptory, and even Gander had not ventured to disobey them.

"Is it possible you have not heard that Mr. Tom was cleared of that, Sir Dene?" asked Mary Barber, breaking the silence.

"I have heard nothing," replied Sir Dene. "What is there to hear?"

Letting her ungloved hands, hard and worn with work, lie folded in her lap, sitting bolt upright in her chair, Mary Barber recounted the facts to Sir Dene. She spoke in her usual deliberate manner; and before she was halfway through, he got up trembling with excitement, and stood facing her.

"And that sinning reptile could suffer the scandal to lie on my grandson Tom, knowing all the while it was himself?"

"He did, Sir Dene. Black confessed to it this very night. You see, sir, if the truth had come out 'twould have ruined Captain Clanwaring with Miss May."

Sir Dene gave a very hard word to Captain Clanwaring, and paced the room in tribulation. There was no one on earth he cared for so much as he cared for Tom.

"Poor Mr. Tom have just been a scapegoat amongst them, and nothing else, sir. He has had to take their sins on himself in manhood as well as in childhood. And as to his being ungrateful to you, Sir Dene," she continued, determined to speak out now she had the chance of doing so, "I don't give



credit to a shred of it. I'll lay my life that he has written to you times and again, if it could be proved, and the letters have never been allowed to reach you. Mr. Tom would desire nothing better than to come back, I know; and as to that letter you wrote to him, calling him home, which Gander posted, rely upon it, sir, that it never went near him. I shouldn't wonder but they gave you a false address."

Whether the woman's emphatic assertions, or the strong sense shining out in every word she spoke, impressed Sir Dene, certain it was that a conviction of the truth took instant possession of his mind. The bitter wrong dealt out to Tom throughout his life by Lady Lydia and her family, seemed to rise up vividly before him. He saw how it had been, as clearly as though scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes.

All the old love for Tom, which had been only suppressed, filled his whole being again. He opened his heart to Mary Barber as it had never been opened to living soul.

"The only child of my dear son, Geoffry!" he cried from his chair, tears of emotion in his eyes. "And I have sent him from me, an exile! Geoffry left him to me; as you know, Mrs. Barber! and this is how I have kept the trust!"

Tears had gathered in her own eyes, hard and cold and grey, as she watched the old man's sorrow. In her homely way she tried to soften it.

"The meeting will be all the sweeter now, Sir Dene. 'Twas not your fault, sir, but theirs that have kept him away. You needn't lose any more time in getting him home, sir."

"Fourteen months!" bewailed Sir Dene. "I've counted them one by one as they have slowly passed. It seems to me, Mrs. Barber, that my life has been nothing but mistakes, it's too late to remedy."

"There's not a single life, Sir Dene, but has mistakes in it. Looking back, we see them; though we couldn't see them at the time, or should have acted differently. It's too late, as you say, sir—we all find it so—too late, except for one thing, and that's just taking them to the Lord for pardon."

Sir Dene nodded thoughtfully, and passed his silk handkerchief over his face. Mary Barber was about to rise and make her farewell curtsy, when he resumed.

"The worst mistake of my life was cutting the road Dene Hollow."

"Well, sir, if I differed from you, 'twould be just an empty compliment, with no truth in it," was her straightforward reply. "No one can say the road has answered."

"Answered!" echoed Sir Dene. "See what it has done for people; and for me more than all. But for that accursed road, my grand-daughter, Margaret, would not be lying to-day in Hurst Leet churchyard."

"My poor mother said, with her dying breath, that she saw the Shadow on it, you know, Sir Dene. She thought it was accursed."

"Ay, old Mrs. Barber. I turned her out, and broke her heart. Did she curse the road?"

"No, no, Sir Dene. Had she cursed it, the curse might never have come. When we leave our wrongs and oppressions to *Him*—the wrongs that bring tears of blood, as 'twere—trying to bear them patiently, as mother tried, it's Him that sends the curse, sir."

"Ay, ay," returned Sir Dene. "Ay."

In the silence that ensued, Mary Barber rose. But again Sir Dene spoke, his eyes lifted to hers.

"I've had her on my mind more than folk think for, Mrs. Barber. Sometimes I see her in my dreams. If the time were to come over again, I'd cut off this right hand rather than take her home from her."

"When things are much in our mind, we're apt to dream of 'em, Sir Dene."

"True. If the dead are permitted to know one another up there," slightly raising his stick—"I'll ask her pardon for what I did."

"Oh, Sir Dene! Don't fear but 'twas all forgiven before she died."

"Night and morning I ask God to pardon me for it, Mrs. Barber. It won't be long before I'm there, now."

"Indeed, Sir Dene, I hope you'll be spared to us for a while yet."

"Not for long," he reiterated. "I've been with Squire Arde, lately—the old Squire, you understand. We have talked

with one another as happy as crickets; and I know we are going to be together again. Three times in all; the third time was last night."

"Do you mean in a dream, sir?" she doubtfully questioned, after a short pause.

"Gander says so. I don't think it. Any way, it will not be long before I am with him."

"And now I must wish you good-night, sir," she resumed, dropping her stiff curtsy. "And I thank you for having been pleased to hear me, Sir Dene."

Sir Dene rose. Bending his weight on his stick with the left hand, he held out the other.

"You will shake hands with me, Mrs. Barber? And you won't forget to bear in mind what I said about your poor mother; how I have repented of all I did with my whole heart, and how it has come home to me."

He shook her hand, and held it for a minute in his; not speaking, but gazing at her steadily and wistfully. Mary Barber felt like a fish out of water.

"The Lord give you comfort, Sir Dene!" she whispered. "I thank you for condescending to see me. And I trust, sir—if you'll not take offence at my saying it—that we shall all meet together in heaven."

He suddenly loosed her hand, and turned to the bell. Gander answering the peal, met Mary Barber on the stairs.

"Gander, why in the world has nobody been honest enough to clear up Mr. Tom to Sir Dene?" she sharply asked.

"Clear up Mr. Tom of what?" returned Gander.

"Why, about that Emma Geach."

"Oh—that. Well, Mr. Priar stopped it. He said Sir Dene must get better first, and then he'd tell him himself."

"Mr. Tom has not had much fair-play among you, as it seems to me. One good thing, Sir Dene knows it now."

"Will you step in and take a glass of anything?" asked Gander, hospitably throwing wide his pantry door, and displaying its blazing fire.

"Me step in!—I haven't time. They'll have sent all over the parish after me at home as it is, I expect, thinking me lost. Good-night, Gander."

## CHAPTER XXI.

## THE ORDERING OF HEAVEN.

"WHO let the woman in?" demanded Lady Lydia of Gander.

"I did, my lady," was the butler's answer, equably given.

"And how dared you do it? How dared you allow her to go up to Sir Dene?"

"I knew of no reason why she shouldn't go up. Mrs. Barber's respectable, my lady. Sir Dene's downright glad to have seen her."

My lady never got much good from Gander. The more imperious she was with him, the more indifferent was he. Next to releasing her beloved son from prison, the great wish of her present days was to get Gander out of Beechhurst Dene. And yet she could not really hope to do it. Even were Sir Dene to have another seizure, a calamity which was expected sooner or later, and become utterly incapable of exerting authority, even were insensibility to set in, my lady could not hope it. For in that case, the probability was, that the heir would take up his abode at the house, and would be the last to suffer the old serving-man to be deposed.

"You take too much upon yourself," retorted my lady.

"I know pretty well when I may take things on myself and when I mayn't, your ladyship. If I had gone up to my master last night, and said, 'Mrs. Barber, from Harebell Farm, is asking to see you, sir,' he'd have said, 'Show her up, Gander, show her up,' and said it eagerly, too."

The word struck on Lady Lydia's ears. "Eagerly! Why eagerly?"

"Well, my lady, 'twasn't so long ago Sir Dene told me he should want me to fetch Mrs. Barber to him one of these days; he wished to talk to her a bit before he died. When I heard her voice at the door last night, asking to see him, the thought crossed my mind that her coming had happened just on purpose."

Of what use contending? None, as Lady Lydia felt.

The visit had been paid, and the harm done; and all the scolding in the world would not undo it now.

After the departure of Mary Barber, Sir Dene said nothing that night of what he had learnt. Gander, who helped him to undress, heard no particulars of the interview—and Sir Dene had grown more confidential with Gander than with anyone else. On the following morning, Thursday, the day we are writing of, Sir Dene's bell rang early. Whilst taking his breakfast, he quietly asked Gander why certain matters, known to all the parish, had been kept from him, whom they most concerned.

Gander, feeling perhaps a little taken back, did not answer on the instant.

"I should have thought you would tell me, Gander, if no one else was honest enough to do so," the old man continued in a pained tone.

"And my tongue has been burning to tell you all along, Sir Dene," broke forth Gander. "But Priar gave so many orders about your being kept quiet that I didn't dare to."

"But for Mrs. Barber I might have gone to my grave, believing my grandson guilty! What possessed Arde, that he could not tell me?"

"Squire Arde has some grudge against Mr. Tom," observed shrewd Gander. "I told the Squire a week ago it was time you heard the truth, Sir Dene, but he charged me to be silent."

"A pretty nest of conspirators you've all been against my poor boy! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Gander!"

"Sir Dene, next to you there's nobody old Gander cares for as he does for Mr. Tom. But when it comes to a choice between you—when his interests are put against yours, meaning your health—why, of course his have to go to the wall. And always will, sir, with me," added the man, stoutly.

"Here—move the tray away. I'll get up now."

"You have not taken as much as usual, sir."

"I've taken as much as I can eat. I want to write a letter."

Sir Dene's hands were flurried; Sir Dene's eyes seemed a little dim; he was longer dressing than usual, and also

longer reading his Prayer-book after Gander had left him. About eleven o'clock he sat down to his desk at the sitting-room fire, Gander putting every article within reach ; pen, ink, paper : and he began his letter. It was the first he had attempted to write since his illness, and the progress was slow and unsatisfactory. His feeble fingers could scarcely hold the pen ; the words were shaky.

“ My dear 'Tom——”

So far had been accomplished when the door was tapped at, and Lady Lydia entered. With her usual bland smile, and the blindest tone she could subdue her harsh voice to, she was beginning to inquire after dear Sir Dene's health and how he had rested ; but he stopped her in the middle.

All that he had heard the previous night, he repeated to her. It was Jarvis who had taken the money ; it was Jarvis who had given rise to the scandal concerning Miss Emma Geach. Sir Dene did not enlarge on the iniquity in itself ; but he did on the dishonour of Jarvis in allowing the odium to rest upon another. He said that he was ashamed of him—her son and his grandson - to his fingers'ends : that so despicable a scoundrel as Jarvis Clanwaring had surely never been suffered to trouble the earth.

Whether Lady Lydia had known of these facts before, Sir Dene could not tell ; the revelation certainly fell upon her with a shock. Her face turned ghastly ; her spirit for the moment seemed to quail. Gathering some courage, she attempted to dispute it ; but Sir Dene stopped her in the midst. He knew it to be true.

“ Where did you hear it ? ” she inquired.

He told her of his interview with Mrs. Barber. And then he bade her leave him that he might get on with his letter.

“ Are you writing to Jarvis to reproach him ? ” she asked, rising from her seat.

“ I would not trouble my hands or my brain to write to him, madam ; writing's a task for me, now, I can tell you,” was Sir Dene's answer. “ Reproach *him* ! A man, capable of acting as he has done, would only laugh at reproach.”

“ I thought you might be,” she said, more humbly than Lady Lydia had ever in her life spoken at Beechhurst Dene.



"I am writing to my grandson Tom, my lady; trying to tell him how keenly his old grandfather feels the pain of having doubted him. He will not lose an hour after he reads the letter, I hope; but travel night and day until he arrives here."

"That is, you are sending for him home?"

"I am, my lady. Never again to leave it whilst I am here."

She quitted the room, carrying her mortification with her; and Sir Dene resumed his letter. It made slow progress. Mind and fingers alike grew weary; and he was fain to put it aside when it was half written. In the fulness of his repentance, Sir Dene was writing more than he need have written, considering that he expected Tom would ere long be with him again.

Meanwhile Lady Lydia was having it out with Gander downstairs, as we have seen. Gander was clearly to blame for all, she reasoned. Had he not admitted the woman, Mary Barber, Sir Dene would have continued to live on in happy ignorance of the truth. And within the last week or two my lady had quite believed she was making some impression on Sir Dene on behalf of the incarcerated ex-captain! She knew that she should never do so now.

"I hate Tom Clanwaring, and wish he was dead!" she breathed to herself. "He has stood in my children's light from the first hour I brought them here, and found him, a miserable unit, lolling on Sir Dene's knee in his frills and velvets. Jarvis has been a fool, and played his cards badly; but that other's an upstart interloper, and he shall never return here to remain if I can drive him away again."

Mr. Priar came in to see Sir Dene, fully confirming all Mary Barber had said: and then talked a short time about Black. An inquest was called, and would be held on the morrow. Sir Dene relieved his mind by a little self-reproach regarding Tom: and Mr. Priar's answer was, that he had always wondered how any one could suspect ill of Tom Clanwaring.

"I wish I had known it all when Arde was here yesterday afternoon!" exclaimed Sir Dene. "I'd have given him a bit

of my mind. If other folk keep things from me, he ought not to do so. Tom's his nephew, or something very like it."

"The Ardes are all off this morning on their visit," observed the surgeon. "I saw the carriage go by."

"Ay. Off to Shropshire for a week or so."

Mr. Arde, with his wife and daughter, generally paid a yearly visit to some relations of Mrs. Arde's in the adjoining county. That they should happen to have gone now, vexed Sir Dene, as it obliged him to keep that "bit of his mind," intended for the Squire, unspoken for a season. He little thought that he would never speak it at all.

"What about the Trailing Indian?" suddenly questioned Sir Dene. "Is it shut up?"

"Oh dear, no," said Mr. Priar.

"Who's keeping it open?"

"Emma Geach, with Sam Pound and his mother up there for company. I'll look in to-morrow, Sir Dene, when the inquest's over, and tell you about it," added the surgeon, rising to depart. "The chief witnesses will be myself and Mary Barber."

Sir Dene got to his letter on the following day. Whilst he was at it Mr. Priar came in to tell him the result of the inquest, just held at the Trailing Indian. "Accidental Death, with a deodand of two pounds on the gun." Had it been any one else's gun, the jury would have put on five pounds. Talking with the doctor he grew fatigued, and resumed his letter late in the afternoon. As Sir Dene was folding it, the same difficulty occurred to him that had occurred once before: he did not know Tom's address.

"Do you recollect it, Gander?" he asked, lifting his spectacles to the old serving-man, who was hovering near the table, almost as much interested in the letter and in Tom's recall as his master. "If not, you must go to my lady again."

"It's in my pantry, Sir Dene. When Mr. Otto was here at Christmas, I got him to write it down in my cellar-book."

Sir Dene wrote Tom's name on the letter, and then waited until Gander came back with his book.

"The letter can't go to-day, Sir Dene. It's too late."

"Too late, is it? I'll 'eave the direction and the sealing

till to-morrow, then. I'm tired, Gander. Here ; put it in and lock up the desk."

Gander locked the letter inside the desk, and gave the key to his master. After that Sir Dene took his dinner, and was more silent in the evening than usual.

"As sure as fate, she's dead at last !"

The exclamation was Gander's. Saturday morning was well advanced, and the postman had just left a letter for Sir Dene, bearing a Scottish postmark. My lady no longer held the bag. It was in a strange handwriting, and had an enormous black seal. Gander was drawing his own conclusions as he carried it up. "Mrs. Clanwaring," the heir's mother must be dead. He generally called her by the old name. She had continued weak since her illness at Christmas, but no danger had been recently apprehended. Gander had always liked her, and was full of sorrow accordingly. His master feeling very ill that day, was remaining in bed.

"I'm afraid here's bad news, Sir Dene," said Gander, going into the chamber. "And I'd have you prepare for it, sir, before opening the letter."

"Not from Tom ! Anything amiss with Tom ?" tremblingly asked Sir Dene, catching sight of the black seal.

"It isn't from Ireland at all, sir, but from Scotland. I'm fearing the poor dear lady's gone at last, sir. Mrs. Clanwaring."

"It's not Dene's writing ?" cried Sir Dene, rather surprised, as he put on his spectacles.

"No, sir, nor Mr. Charley's, either. They'd be too much cut up to write ; not a doubt of it. Both of 'em was rare fond of their mother."

Sir Dene, breaking the seal, fixed his eyes on the few lines the letter contained. It seemed that he could not take in their purport. A look of horror stole slowly over his face, and he fell back on the pillow, motioning to Gander to take the letter.

"It can't be ! It can't be !" he faintly said. "Read ! Read !"

In surprise and some dread, Gander put on his own spectacles. And when the reading was accomplished, he was not much less overcome than his master.

It was grievous news. Not Mrs. Clanwaring; it was not she who had died; but her two brave sons, Dene and Charles. They had been drowned in one of the Scottish lakes. A pleasure party of ten, young men, had set sail in the early spring morning; an accident happened, and only two of them lived to land again. Dene and Charles were amongst the drowned.

Before Gander could at all recover his senses, or believe he read rightly, all his attention had to be given to his master. Sir Dene was showing symptoms of another fit of paralysis.

"God's mercy avert it!" ejaculated Gander, ringing the bell for help. "And who on earth's come now? That's a travelling chaise rattling up the gravel!"

Clattering up to the door of Beechhurst Dene was a rickety post-chaise and pair containing Otto Clanwaring, who had travelled down to Worcester by the London mail. Otto had received the account of his cousins' melancholy fate earlier than Sir Dene. Poor Mrs. Clanwaring—we may as well call her so to the end—had been mindful of the old man even in the midst of her sorrow, and wrote to ask Otto to go down and break it to him in advance of the direct news. The barrister was not quite in time.

Leaping from the chaise, Otto encountered the face of Gander, pale and horror-stricken.

"What has brought you here, Mr. Otto?"

"Sad news, Gander: grievous news," was the answer. "I have come to break it to my grandfather."

"You're too late, sir. We've had a letter, and I'm afeard Sir Dene's going to have another stroke. This chaise had better go galloping off for Priar."

"Priar!" returned Otto. "Priar is coming up now. I passed him as he was turning in at the lodge-gates."

"Thank goodness for that! it's a great mercy!" was the old butler's answer, as he turned to hasten upstairs again.

Too true! Too true! Dene Clanwaring, the heir to the title and estate of Beechhurst Dene, and his brother Charles, were no more. Full of health and spirits and hopes, their career in this world had been suddenly cut short in its promise, and they were called to meet their Maker. Only one week

later, had they been spared, they would have come on a long visit to Beechhurst Dene.

Lady Lydia was as one stunned. She had been wearing out her heart with futile prayers and wishes for the release of her son; but never were the wishes so feverishly earnest as now. Oh, if her beloved Jarvis could only be there!—if he were only at hand to take up the lost heir's place with his grandfather!

"Send for him; send for him!" moaned Sir Dene faintly—and they were the first words he uttered. Lady Lydia, Otto, the surgeon, and Gander stood around his bed. The threatening stroke still kept away; but not, as Mr. Priar thought, for long; and Sir Dene seemed weak almost unto death.

"I cannot send for him," wailed Lady Lydia, in her bewildered state of mind taking the words as an answer to her wishes, and dropping hot tears. "That is, it's of no use my sending, for he could not come! Oh, Sir Dene, don't you remember? He is in a debtor's prison—as I have been telling you every day for weeks."

Sir Dene looked at her with questioning eyes in the surrounding silence. "Not he: not Jarvey," he said, when understanding dawned on him. "I don't want *him*. You know it, my lady. I want my own boy, Tom. My heir."

"Tom!" shrieked Lady Lydia. "*Tom* the heir! 'Tom!'"

"Of course he is the heir, mother," put in Otto. "What are you thinking about?"

It was a positive fact that the obvious and to her most unwelcome truth had never crossed her brain. She refused to see it now that it was pointed out, and stared around with frightened eyes.

"Of course it is so," said Otto, answering what the eyes seemed to question. "Tom must come here without delay. I wrote to him before I left London."

"He never shall come! He never shall be the heir," hissed my lady in a storm of passion. "A low-lived, mischief-making scapegrace! *He* the heir? Never. I won't recognize him as such. I will not allow him to be received at Beechhurst Dene." Perhaps the barrister was not the only one in the room who wondered whether excitement was temporarily

turning Lady Lydia's brain. He caught her hand and drew her beyond the hearing of the invalid.

"Pray exercise your common sense, mother," he quietly said. "Tom Clanwaring is the heir in the eyes of man and of the country ; as much the heir as was the poor fellow who is gone. A few days —I see it in his face," he whispered, indicating Sir Dene—"nay, more probably a few hours, and Tom will not be heir but master of Beechhurst Dene."

Gander deemed it well to put a spoke in the wheel. "There's no power that could keep Mr. Tom out of it, my lady. He inherits by the law of succession. The king and all his nobles couldn't do it."

Lady Lydia sank on a chair with a low cry of despair. Tom Clanwaring master ! Was *this* to be the ending ? Had she schemed and planned and toiled in her underhand way all these long years only for this ? Even so. For once right had been stronger than might, and had triumphed.

But Sir Dene was speaking from the bed.

"It's almost as it should be," he said—and they had to bend down to catch his accents. "In the old days I used to wish my dear son Geoffry was my heir, instead of John : just as later I've caught myself wishing 'twas Geoffry's son, instead of Dene. For I never loved any of them as I've loved Tom. Dene was good and dutiful to me, and I loved him next best ; but Tom I had here as an infant, you see, and he grew up in my heart. It has pleased the Lord to take Dene and Charley before me to the better Land —and I hope in His mercy we shall soon meet there, and dwell together for ever ! Tom has now to fulfil Dene's duties here, and he'll do it well. It's not the ordering of man, but of Heaven."



## CHAPTER XXII.

## THE NEW MASTER.

It was a very few days afterwards. Another visitor was arriving at Beechhurst Dene. Not rattling up in a chaise, as Otto had done, but walking in all humility, and carrying his own portmanteau. Not any one so short and slight as Otto, this, but a tall, commanding man, with a sweet smile on his fair Saxon face. For very lightness of heart smiled he, in the joy of seeing the dear old familiar places again.

It was Tom Clanwaring. As speedily as wind and road could bring him after the receipt of Otto's letter, he had come. And the wind had been strong and favourable, filling the sails of the good ship, and sending her to a swift haven; thence across country by coach, which brought him to within a mile of Beechhurst Dene. Otto's letter had been brief and somewhat vague. "Poor Dene and Charles are *dead*, Tom. Come off at once."

It had been little more. In the surprise and shock, Tom really knew not what to think. He could not picture to himself any possibility so bad as that: there must be a mistake on Otto's part: his worst fears did not point to the death of both. But on landing in England, a newspaper giving an account of it, chanced to fall in his way. He learnt that it was, indeed, too true, and that he was the next heir to Beechhurst Dene.

He could not realize it. Never once during the whole of his chequered life, had so wild an idea entered his imagination. The bare fact, that by any remote contingency he might succeed, had been totally overlooked. He, the despised, humiliated waif who had been taught to regard himself as not fit company for the other grandchildren, had been put upon, neglected, made to earn his bread—*he*, the heir! In truth, it was incredible. Tom himself could not fully believe it until it should be confirmed by his grandfather; and it must be said that any gratification he might otherwise have felt at the prospect, was lost sight of in his grief for the fate of Dene

and Charles. The two boys had always liked him : since Dene grew to manhood he had always stood up for Tom.

There was no hesitation in his steps as he approached the house, but there was doubt in his heart. Responding instantly to Otto's peremptory recall, Tom had not received with it any intimation that he would be welcomed by his grandfather. During all his fourteen months of exile, he had never once heard from Sir Dene ; never been told that Sir Dene's anger had turned, or that he wanted him home again. Otto Clanwaring had once written to advise him to come and chance it ; but Tom would not do that without a summons from Sir Dene. Sir Dene *had* sent him a summons, as we know : but my Lady Lydia had taken care it did not reach Tom. In short, had Ireland been isolated from all communication with the rest of the world, Tom could not have remained in much greater ignorance of Beechhurst Dene and its doings since he left it.

The lodge windows were closely veiled by their white blinds : he noted it as he passed. Generally speaking, they were gay with children's heads. It was the first corroboration his sight had received of the death of his cousins, and it brought the fact home to him. "Oh, Dene, Dene !" he cried in his heart. "If I could only see you coming down the avenue to meet me, as you used to do !"

At that moment, the death-bell rang out from Hurst Leet Church. Very distinctly it came to his ears in the still spring air. Tom stopped and listened.

"It is for Dene and Charles !" he softly said. "Better that I, the friendless waif, had gone, than they, rich in all things that make life dear !"

At that time it was the custom for the bell to toll an hour night and morning, every day between the death and the burial. Sometimes, when the deceased was of unusual importance, at mid-day also.

But this was not the ordinary tolling Tom had supposed it to be ; it was the passing-bell. After the three times three—for Dene and Charles it would have been six times three—there rang out a succession of sharp quick strokes, indicating that a soul had just passed to its account. As Sir Dene, in the

years long gone by, had stood that night in Dene Hollow, listening to the passing-bell for poor Maria, Tom's pretty mother, so Tom stood listening now; but he knew not for whom it was sounding.

Every window in the house was closed; he saw that as he neared it. It looked what it was—a house of the dead. Excepting that smoke was issuing from some of the chimneys, there was no sign that it was inhabited. As he rang the bell, a favourite dog came leaping round from the back, recognized Tom, and began to lick his hand.

"You are glad to see me, at any rate, Carlo, old fellow!" was his comment, as he stooped to caress the dog. "I wonder whether any one else will be glad? I wonder," ran his thoughts, "whether they will give me house-room—let me occupy my old bed in the garret?"

It was Gander who gently drew open the door. In his tribulation at what had fallen on the house, Gander would not have allowed a footman to open that front-door, lest he might do it noisily. When he saw Tom standing there, he stared in utter astonishment.

"Don't you know me, Gander?"

"*Know* you, sir! But we didn't think you could ha' got here so soon—and carrying your own portmanteau! I expected to see you arrive in a chaise-and-four."

Tom was heartily shaking the old man's hand. "I hardly dared come on foot, Gander," he said, in reference to the last remark. "As to chaises-and-four, they have been for my betters, not for me," he added, the feverish eagerness of his low tones betraying how much the question was to him. "Has my grandfather forgiven me? Will he receive me kindly?"

Gander looked at him. The great fact, making havoc of his heart, was so intensely real that he was slow to believe Tom could be ignorant of it.

"Mercy upon us, sir! Haven't ye heard? My master's gone."

"Gone! Gone where?"

"He's DEAD," cried forth Gander, breaking down. "Dead, Mr. Tom. And I ask pardon for calling you so. You're Sir Tom now."

The fresh colour was deserting Tom Clanwaring's face. "I spoke of my grandfather, Gander," he said, in accents that had in them ever so much of dread. "*He* cannot be dead?"

"He died at mid-day, Sir Tom. It's barely an hour ago. Yes, sir, it's true; my dear old master is dead and gone."

And Tom knew then that the passing-bell had been for Sir Dene. He sat down on one of the hall chairs, feeling stunned and the tears overflowed. The shock was sudden, and very bitter. In his whole life he had never been so unmanned; or his feelings so wrung as now. Otto Clanwaring, coming down the stairs, approached, and held out his hand.

"Oh, Otto! it seems very cruel. Not to have seen him! Could you not have sent for me in time?"

"It has been so sudden at the last," spoke the barrister. "When I wrote to you from London, there was nothing the matter with him. He died blessing you, Tom; has charged us—me and Gander—with the most loving messages for you, the truest and tenderest words."

"But he never recalled me," returned Tom, his heart feeling as if it would break. "I have always lived in hope of it."

"He did recall you, Mr. Tom," spoke up Gander. "He wrote months ago, asking you to come back to him, and I posted the letter. When the days went on, and you didn't answer, Sir Dene thought you bore malice, and wouldn't."

"I never received the letter," said Tom, looking alternately at Otto and at Gander, as if questioning where the fault could have been. "I have written to him from time to time, but never have had a line from him since I left."

"Why, in his last illness he said that he had never had a line from you, Tom," exclaimed Otto.

"And he never did," assented Gander.

"Then who has had the letters?" questioned Tom. "The last I sent was at Christmas. I wrote to wish my grandfather a happy new year. I wrote to you as well Gander."

"We never had any letters from you, Mr. Tom; neither him nor me. As to who had 'em, perhaps my lady will be able to tell," added bold Gander. "'Twas she used to unlock the bag."

And not one present but knew from that moment that the correspondence had been suppressed. Tom rose and took up his portmanteau. The action shocked Gander.

"I ask your pardon, Sir Tom—chattering here when I ought to be waiting on you! Jones," to a servant at the back of the hall, "carry up Sir Tom's portmanteau."

"Is it my old room, Gander?"

"Your old room!" returned Gander, scandalized at the question. "The state rooms have been prepared for you, Sir Tom, level with Sir Dene's. Are you forgetting who you are, sir?"

It seemed that Gander at least would not allow him to forget. In this unexpected accession to place and power, a reminiscence of his familiarity with Tom in the old days was troubling Gander; he had observed towards him no ceremony whatever—as he would have done always to the heir. The fact caused him to make more of Sir Tom now.

Stepping on before, he marshalled Tom along the corridor to the state rooms, and flung the door open, Jones and the portmanteau bringing up the rear. But for his sad heart Tom would have laughed. As the two men were returning, a door in the middle of the passage was unlatched, and Lady Lydia's face showed itself.

"What mean these unseemly footsteps, Gander?" she tartly inquired.

"The young master has just arrived, my lady, and I have been conducting him to his rooms."

"The young master?" she repeated, not catching Gander's meaning.

"The new master, my lady, I ought rather to say. Sir Tom Clanwaring."

It was the first time she had heard the title; the first time she had ever in her whole life *imagined* it. Sir Tom Clanwaring! Staring at the servants for a moment, as one on whom some great blow had fallen, she shut the door in their faces, and gave vent to a cry of pain in the privacy of her chamber.

Well, yes. Tom Clanwaring was master of Beechhurst Dene to all intents and purposes. One had died; another

had succeeded. But that it should be *this* one to succeed read like a page out of a romance.

During the few days intervening before his death, Sir Dene remained perfectly sensible. Very weak and feeble, at times not able to speak, but with all his faculties undimmed. He seemed to foresee that Tom would not arrive before the end, and charged Otto with all sorts of loving messages for him. One of the last things he spoke of was the road, Dene Hollow ; regretting in much distress that he had ever made it. This was that same morning, not an hour before his death.

“When I wrote out my will I thought it would be Dene to come after me, you see, Otto,” he feebly said, “and I charged him with the concern of that road, and other things. You will tell Tom to carry them out ; it is he who must do it now.”

“I will tell him, grandfather,” replied Otto. “Who are your executors?”

“Executors? Oh, Tom.”

“But surely not Tom alone!” returned the barrister in surprise.

“The other was Dene. And he has gone before me. The will is written in duplicate, Otto. One copy will be found in the bay-parlour ; the right-hand secret drawer of the secretary ; the other lies at my lawyer’s in Worcester.”

As the old man spoke, a thought crossed Otto. It was not usual to make last testaments in duplicate ; had Sir Dene done it as security against fraud?—the possible fraud of Otto’s mother and brother? The barrister bit his lip, and strove to persuade himself that he was wrong in thinking it.

“Tom will make a better master of Beechhurst Dene than any of you ; better even than Dene would have made,” murmured the dying man. “Just as Geoffry would have made a better one than John. Tom’s a gentleman and a Christian ; he’ll do his duty to Heaven as well as to man. There’ll be no oppression from him ; wrongs will be righted, the poor cared for. God bless him ! God reward him for all he has done in his life for his poor old grandfather ! God be ever with him, his Guide and Friend, until He shall land him safely on the eternal shore !”



These were the last words heard from Sir Dene. He said more to himself, but their substance could not be caught. An hour later, the stroke that had been waited for seized him, and in a few minutes he had ceased to exist.

When Tom came forth from his room, the travelling dust removed, his clothes changed, Otto took him in to see Sir Dene. How sore his heart was as he gazed down on the beloved old face, none but himself would ever know. He had so changed in the past year that Tom could scarcely recognize him: he would have given a great deal to have arrived a day earlier.

On a small table near the bed lay Sir Dene's watch, chain and seals: the same chain and seals Tom had played with as a child, seated on Sir Dene's knee—the same watch Sir Dene had many a time held to his little ear that he might listen to the ticking.

"They should not lie there, Otto," he said, involuntarily. "They ought to be locked up."

"Yes. There has been no time to do anything yet. Here are the keys," added Otto, holding out the bunch that lay on the same small table. "You had better take possession of them."

"Why am I to take possession of them?"

"Because it is your right. I expect it will be found that all things are left in your power. In any case, you are sole master here."

"There's a letter for you in Sir Dene's desk, I believe," resumed Otto. "It was the last he ever wrote—indeed the only thing he has written since his first illness. Before it could be posted, Gander had news of Dene's death and your recall."

Tom hastened to find the letter and open it: the kindly, loving letter—which it half broke his heart to read. Sir Dene told him in it that he had never in his whole life loved a son or grandson as he had loved him: he told him that though he had, through the machinations of others, banished him for a time, he had never in the depth of his heart believed him in any way unworthy.

"Luncheon's waiting, Sir Tom," whispered Gander, meeting

him on the stairs. "I wouldn't let it be served till I thought you were ready ; and my lady's in a fine temper."

A flush rose to his fair features as he advanced to Lady Lydia in the dining-room. She and her aide-de-camp, Doveton, had taken counsel together on the untoward state of affairs, and had come to the conclusion that nothing remained but to make the best of them. So, my lady, tacitly eating humble-pie, met Tom with one whole hand stretched out, and a smile on her vinegar face. Never before had she accorded him more than a frown and a finger.

Force of habit is strong. After Lady Lydia had moved to the table, Tom went to his old place, and was about to take it when he was pounced upon by Gander.

"Sir Tom ! This is your place now."

"This" was the seat at the head of the table, formerly Sir Dene's. One moment's hesitation, and then Tom took it, the flush deepening on his face. And never once, either then or later, was Lady Lydia reminded by so much as a word or look, that his position was changed from that of yore. Sir Dene had rightly summed up Tom as "a true gentleman."

Only on that same afternoon had the Ardes returned home, and the first tidings that greeted them were that Sir Dene was dead. They could hardly believe it to be true : when they had quitted home Sir Dene had been so well. The Squire despatched Mark to Beechhurst Dene to inquire particulars of the barrister, who he was told was down ; and waited impatiently, after his custom, for the man's return. May was with him : and the shades of evening were beginning to fall.

"Here's Mark, papa," said May, as she heard his voice in the hall. "He seems to have brought some one with him. It must be Otto Clanwaring."

Not Otto : not his slight figure at all : but a tall, graceful man, he who appeared when the door was thrown open. The Squire could see so much, as he peered through the gloom at his visitor, and at Mark who was showing him in.

"Sir Tom Clanwaring."

"Who? What?" cried the Squire, sharply.

"Sir Tom Clanwaring, sir," repeated Mark.

Ay, it was he ; the master of Beechhurst Dene. The Squire

felt something like a lunatic in his bewilderment: and May's heart pulsed on with a rush and a bound. Conscience was striking the Squire. He had long known how utterly worthy Tom Clanwaring was, how shamefully he had been traduced: but in alarm, lest he, the despised and penniless, should make way with his daughter, he had continued to abuse him. And now, here he was, lord of all. Like Lady Lydia, Squire Arde was content to eat humble-pie.

"Only to think of it, Tom—that you should have shot up above them all!" cried he, when the first greetings had passed. "I dare say the rest won't get much."

"I'll make it right for every one as far as I can," replied Tom, with his warm-hearted smile. "And what about myself, personally, Squire?" he resumed, the smile becoming rather mischievous. "Am I still regarded as a scapegrace?"

Squire Arde's voice was subdued as he answered, his countenance somewhat crestfallen. "Tom, I don't think any one conscientiously believed anything against you: not even Lady Lydia. Sir Dene has wanted you home all the time; and was never quite the same after you left. As to that money——"

"Never mind about the money," interrupted Tom.

"I was going to say that not long ago Harry Cole imparted to me a very nasty suspicion as to who really stole it. He saw some one at the secretary himself that night. When I blew him up for not avowing it, he said you had forbidden him to do so. What do you know?"

"Never mind," repeated Tom. "We will let bygones be bygones."

The Squire was not to be put down. "Tom, I mean to have this out with you. Surely you may trust me! The thief was that villainous man, Jarvis Clanwaring. Did you know it was he at the time?"

"I suspected it. I was not sure of it. That night, as Sir Dene, refusing to hear me, left me in the bay-parlour, I flung out at the glass doors, I fear in a passion, and came upon Jarvis Clanwaring looking in at a corner of the window. He murmured some excuse, which I did not stay to hear, and he went on into the room. Subsequently, after I had seen you at

Bristol, I received a letter from Cole, who must have been passing the window immediately afterwards. It seems Cole took up an idea that I was suspected, and wrote to tell me he had seen some one else at the secretary. I wrote back and silenced him."

"Why on earth did you do that?"

"What did it matter, sir? I knew Sir Dene would never suspect me; no, nor other people really; at least none that I cared for. It would have been damaging Jarvis unnecessarily, you see."

"What do you mean by unnecessarily?"

"Well, without doing much good to myself. My best friends would know I was not guilty. For the rest, my back was a tolerably broad one in those days. Appropriating a little money when I was starting out to see the world was but a trifling addition to my burden."

"How considerate you are, Tom—and how forgiving!"

"It is my nature to be so, I think, sir; I take no credit for it. I don't deserve any. People tell me it was in my father's nature. Let bygones be bygones in all ways," he emphatically added, rising and grasping the Squire's hand. "For my part, I mean to do all I can for every one. Even have Jarvis here for the funeral—if he likes to come to it."

"He had better not show his face within my doors," said the Squire wrathfully. "Jarvis Clanwaring is an unmitigated scoundrel. As to coming to the funeral, no fear of that. He is in prison, you know."

"So I find. Otto is about to take steps to release him."

"At your expense?"

"It's hardly to be called that, sir. With Sir Dene's money."

There was an interval of silence. Mr. Arde's mind was occupied.

"Tom, we have never properly valued you."

"Then I hope you will value me all the more in the future, sir," answered Tom, slightly laughing. "May I see May?" he added, after a pause, his tone serious now, and very pointed. "She ran away as I came in."

"Go and find her, my dear boy; go and find her," was the

impulsive answer—and it spoke volumes to Tom Clanwaring's ear. "How blind we have been!" continued Mr. Arde. "I tried to set her against you, Tom, just as much as the rest did. I hope you'll forgive us all."

"You know, sir, we have agreed that bygones shall be bygones," he gently said, suppressing his emotion.

In the adjoining room, before the fire, on the hearthrug, was May. She started up as Tom went in, and put up her hands in deprecation; feeling faint in her heart-sickness of shame and repentance. He said not a syllable of reproach; only took her in his arms and held her face to his.

"Oh, Tom, Tom! I can never forgive myself——"

"Hush, May! I will not let you breathe a word of regret," he fondly interrupted. "I know how it was. Otto has told me all, and has not spared his brother. The battle against you waged fiercely; you were beset on all sides; you held out as long as your strength lasted, and then yielded in very weariness."

"No, it was not want of strength," she interposed, the tears falling from her eyes. "I could have held out always, but that they made me believe—believe all sorts of things against you."

"I know. It is all over now, my darling; and I am here not only to claim but to protect you. Look up, May; I must kiss those tears away. You shall never have cause to shed any more if I can help it."

"But so ugly a name—Sir Tom!" exclaimed Mrs. Arde, not knowing whether to laugh or cry for joy and trying to get up some grievance as a counterfoil to her gratification. Tom had gone away then, and she and her daughter were alone.

"So is May," replied that young lady, a remnant of the old sauciness cropping up.

"Nonsense, child! Your name is not May at all, but Millicent Mary."

"I am never called anything but May. Oh, mamma, dear mamma, do not let us pretend to make troubles where they no longer exist; we have had to bear too many real ones. Think

how good God has been to us ! But for that snowstorm, I should have been bound for life to Jarvis Clanwaring."

But, after all, Sir Tom Clanwaring was not to be Sir Tom. As though some instinct had guided Sir Dene, it was expressly stated in his will that should any one of his younger grandsons succeed him, through mishap to his heir, the successor should assume and bear the name of Dene. So that Tom had to take the name of his grandfather, and become Sir Dene Clanwaring.

In this last will and testament of Sir Dene's, he expressed his regret for having made the road, Dene Hollow : and gave directions in the strongest terms that it should forthwith be ploughed up. "For," ran the words, "it was made out of a neighbour's wrongs, and God's blessing has never rested on it." A very pretty cottage, better than the one formerly pulled down, was left to Mary Barber for life—to her own unbounded astonishment.

An income was secured to Lady Lydia : the small amount of which, small especially in her own idea, nearly turned her dumb. Jarvis's name was not even mentioned ; Otto came in for a substantial sum ; Gander had a legacy of fifty pounds a year for life. And Tom was left residuary legatee, just as much to his own astonishment as the cottage was to Mary Barber's ; for the will had been made whilst he was in Ireland, ostensibly lying under Sir Dene's displeasure. This, of itself would have made Tom rich for life. Only the entailed estates and the contents of Beechhurst Dene would have come to the heir. Tom himself was sole heir now.

And, being on the subject of bequests, it may as well be mentioned that Mr. Randy Black also left a will, after the manner of his betters. Towards the last years of his life it had been supposed that he was living almost from hand to mouth upon the scanty profits of the Trailing Indian, or upon any less legitimate returns he could pick up by poaching. It turned out, however, that Mr. Randy Black had a few hundred pounds in store ; the furniture of the inn, old but substantial, was also his, and the whole of it, without reserve, was bequeathed to his "adopted daughter," Emma Geach.

So Miss Emma turned out to be an heiress in a small way.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

## CONCLUSION.

MIDSUMMER-DAY had passed, and June was drawing to its close. The blue skies were cloudless; the sun was setting in a flood of gold; the scent of the new-mown hay filled the still evening air. Out of doors nothing could be more calm and peaceful: within doors, at Arde Hall, all was bustle, preparation, and excitement. For on the morrow its daughter was to become Lady Clanwaring.

Things at Beechhurst Dene had settled down into their ordinary routine, and Tom was as calm and efficient a chieftain as though he had been born and reared to it. Nay, far more so. Brought up in their pride and exclusiveness, not one of them would have made the considerate and thoroughly capable master that Tom made. "Tom," to his friends still, "Sir Dene" to the world.

Some people said he would be too lenient, too good-hearted, for his own interests. Witness, for instance, his having granted a renewal of the lease of the Trailing Indian to Miss Emma Geach! Miss Emma, bold as of old, had presented himself one day in the bay-parlour, where young Sir Dene sat over his papers, and calmly asked for it. Would she be able to make a living at the inn, was Sir Dene's question; and she said, "Yes, without doubt," and imparted a little news about herself. She was about to be married to Jim Pound. *She* should keep the inn going, and attend to the customers, whilst Jim would go out to his regular employment as usual. And she intended to conduct the inn respectably, she added—and Tom saw that she meant it—and would tolerate none of the disreputable characters Black had favoured. She also purposed, if Sir Dene had no objection, to alter the name of the inn to the "Wheatsheaf," and to have a new signboard painted, showing a sheaf of corn, heavily gilded. Sir Dene replied that he had no objection in the world; but on the contrary, thought the "Wheatsheaf" bore a more reputable

sound than the "Trailing Indian." So he promised her the lease; and shook hands with her for their early friendship's sake, and wished her prosperity with all his heart. As Mr. James Pound was a hard-working, steady, simple young man, who had never had but one idea in his head, and that was admiration of Miss Emma Geach, and would be sure to let her be mistress and master in the future, Tom considered her prospects of domestic felicity very fair indeed.

Witness, too, what he had done for Mary Barber—furnished the pretty cottage for her in the most comfortable manner possible. At all this the parish shook its prudent head: clearly young Sir Dene was not sufficiently awake to his own interests.

But, if he was not going in for his own particular interests, he undoubtedly was for his people's affection. Tenants and servants had already found out how good he would be to them, how implicitly they might trust his honour and generosity. The trials he had undergone throughout his life had been the best possible training for him: Heaven, foreseeing things as we cannot, had no doubt been fitting Tom Clanwaring for the lot he was to fulfil in life. Geoffrey's dying prayer for his child's best welfare had been heard.

Jarvis Clanwaring, released from his debts, had declined to attend his grandfather's funeral; for he had sufficient sense of shame not to show his face again in the neighbourhood of Hurst Leet. A post was obtained for him in India, in which he might do well if he chose to be steady: and he had already sailed for it. Lady Lydia had fixed her abode in London: Doveton, of course, being with her: and Tom generously doubled the income bequeathed to her by Sir Dene.

And Dene Hollow was a road no longer. A ploughed field now existed where it had been. Just as the new highway in the years gone by had obliterated all trace of the widow Barber's house, so the ploughed field now obliterated all trace of the highway. But the convenience of Hurst Leet and its people was not lost sight of. Tom had persuaded Mr. Arde to allow another road to be cut through his property, Tom undertaking its cost. It was a better site for it than the other, and was just where it ought to have been made at first. And so, the time had gone on to Midsummer, and the wedding of

Sir Dene and May Arde was fixed for one of those last days of June.

They stood together, he and his betrothed, on this their marriage eve, in the small room of Arde Hall that had once been the young lady's schoolroom. The servants were busy setting out the breakfast in the dining-room; Mrs. Arde was in the drawing-room, putting finishing touches to the vases of flowers, Charlotte Scrope, now to be really bridesmaid, helping her. Miss May had been wilful. Not an earthly thing, even to a bit of ribbon, as Susan Cole angrily asserted, prepared for the other wedding, would she allow to serve for this. The attire, both for bride and bridesmaid, had to be bought anew. To the last hour of Susan's life she would not cease to grumble at the folly and waste of it all. Even now she had been giving Miss May a little of her opinion, although the young lady was standing by the side of her bridegroom-elect.

It was a shabby little room, but the only free one in the house that evening. The last rays of the sun fell upon them as they stood side by side at the open window through which the sweet scent of the hay was wafted. Both were quiet and somewhat serious; but oh! what happiness filled their hearts! Squire Arde had been watching the men at work on the new road, but had now left the room. Susan Cole, a basket of ribbon on her arm, a needle and thread in her hand, was ostensibly making up white favours, and passing in and out at will. Susan, for some cause not yet explained, was in a very volcanic temper that evening; almost every one she came near being treated to a touch of tartness.

"They are giving up for the night," observed May, alluding to the labourers beyond the field.

"And for the morrow also," added Sir Dene. For old and young, rich and poor, were on the morrow to rest from their labour.

"How glad they must be when their day's work is over," said May, shyly, at Tom's reminder. "They are taking away their implements."

"Glad to get the work to do, I should say," put in Susan. "Glad that folk are found to be at the cost of new roads to give them work."

She flourished out of the room again, basket on arm, as abruptly as she had just flourished into it. Tom's blue eyes shone with a merry light.

"The new road has never altogether met with Susan's approbation," he said. "She thinks I need not have gone to the expense of making it."

"She is getting stingy in everything," returned May, remembering the reproof just launched at herself about the wedding garments. "Tom, I fancy sometimes it's because she's growing old."

"It's because she likes her own opinion, May. She is not growing old yet."

"It was quite right to make the road; and to do everything else that you are doing. Tom, we shall be dreadfully rich, and shall never be able to spend all the money."

He shook his head with a smile. "I could spend twice as much, May, if I had it."

"On ourselves?" lifting her eyes to his in surprise.

"No. On others."

"There will be sufficient for all, Tom. This will be ours, sometime, you know. Who could have thought the two properties would ever be united!"

"Who would have thought at one time that you and I should ever be united, May?"

"Who!—why, from the very beginning——"

She stopped suddenly, with a bright blush. His whole face was laughing.

"What, May? Go on." But Miss May grew very hot indeed, and bit her lips.

"Well, May? I am waiting to hear."

"Never mind, Tom. If you intend to take me up so sharply, you had better tell me so beforehand."

"And if I do tell you so?"

"Why, then—I am not sure that I will be married at all."

"No! That breakfast in the other room must not be wasted, you know, May."

"I don't know anything about it, sir. And I think——"

But instead of saying what she thought, May leaned her head upon Tom's shoulder and broke into tears.

"Why, May! What is it?"

Gently raising her head, he put down his own face and waited to know what the sorrow was.

"Not sorrow at all," she whispered. "It's not the first time since you came back that I've cried for happiness. I am very silly, Tom, but I can't help it. Every now and then the past troubles flash into my mind, the terrible fate I only just escaped, and I begin to contrast it with our present mercies. God has been very good to us."

"More than good, May. Who is this?"

The intruder proved to be Otto Clanwaring, come down to be Sir Dene's best man at the wedding.

They walked home together arm-in-arm, the two young men, talking soberly one with the other. Of the crowd expected in church on the morrow; of Mary Barber's best grey gown and the shawl with the border of lilies and roses to be worn at it. Of Harry Cole's old mother, who was to be driven down to the church by him. Of Mrs. James Pound's (no longer Miss Emma Geach) late smart wedding attire to be equally displayed. Of Gander's prominent place in the rear of the procession. In short, of the generally satisfactory state of all things.

And the stars came out one by one in the clear sky, and the whole atmosphere, within and without, seemed full of peace. As they went up the avenue, and came in sight of Beechhurst Dene, its master lifted his hat, and his lips moved. Otto thought Tom was murmuring words about the warmth of the night. In truth, the words were very different.

"God be thanked for the way He has led me since the day I was carried in here, an infant waif, in my father's arms! May He be ever with me to the end!"

My friends—in conclusion. Dark days have embittered the lives of some of us, just as they embittered Tom Clanwaring's. They will dawn for us again. Days when we look yearningly into the far corners of the wide earth for a gleam of comfort, and look in vain: there is not a ray in the sunless sky, not a star in the darkened firmament. But above this dreary earth is Heaven. *There* sits ONE who sees all our

cares, notes our oppressions, hears our sighs, pities our tears ; and who will surely in His own good time change our darkness to light if we only patiently trust in Him.

A new reign was begun at the Dene in all happiness. And in time the patter of small feet was heard echoing in the halls and corridors. And the happiness of Susan Cole's life was perfected as she once more presided in the nursery with all the old love and tyranny that she had showered upon Miss May in the days gone by.

But Hurst Leet was never persuaded out of the belief that Robert Owen's ghost had appeared. Only people did not talk much of it abroad, as he was the grandfather of Sir Dene.

THE END



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